

MARTI

★★★★

Better Mistakes

(FOD RECORDS) www.myspace.com/martimusic



Italian outfit Marti's mission statement declares that they're here to inject drama, style and substance into music. Well, on the evidence of *Better Mistakes*, subtitled An 11 Song Cinematic Affair, they can consider their mission duly accomplished.

It's a rapturous collection bathed in the strings of The Three Penny And A Half Orchestra and steered by the deep-set vocals of Andrea Bruschi, which favourably echo those of Cousteau's Liam McKahey, and Black (remember him?). The film reference suggests *noir* more than blockbuster, particularly on 'Havana Bride', 'Wouldn't It Be Fine?' and 'The Return Of The Dishwasher'. What's also audible is a love of classic British pop – avant-pop, even – on the title track and 'Ten Long Years'.

This classy release should finally banish the ghost of Zuccherò and enable Marti to make a successful transition from central Europe to these shores.

David Burke

UK, at least at a sensible price, and is self-penned with four songs co-written with his son, Dylan.

The first two tracks, 'Little Bit A Love' and 'Rockin' Tonight', are the radio-friendly selections: good solid rockers that make for excellent road music. The more thoughtful songs begin with 'Cross', probably the pick of the album, although the final 'So Small' runs it a close second. 'Cross' is one of those anthemic songs that engender the wise nodding of heads at gigs but crank it up a bit and it could lead to full-blown arm waving, swaying fervour.

The lyrics are available from Bruce's website but it's a pity that they weren't included – I felt the need of them several times: 'Flew MacCarthy Home' becomes immediately clear with the words to hand.

Dai Jeffries

DAVID CROSS AND ANDREW KEELING

★★★★

English Sun

(NOISY RECORDS) www.noisy.co.uk



Ever since he first attracted public attention, manfully holding his own in that most brutally exhilarating line-up of King Crimson, David

Cross's imaginative approach to the violin in a rock context has always been worth a listen. This release, however, whilst drawing on the improvisational qualities – not to mention the technical hardware – acquired from more than three decades in the rock business, is much more in the contemporary classical sphere.

Partnered by flautist Andrew Keeling, who has written for such luminaries as The Hilliard Ensemble and Gothic Voices, Cross describes these improvised pieces as "electric chamber music". Each of the nine pieces carries an indefinable evocation of landscape, the overall effect amounting to an English pastoral Baroque. Don't be fooled into expecting twee New Age-isms, though: no one's going to be meditating through the distorted, delayed violin of 'Lamentoso', and there are still deep shadows of a Crimson edge lurking in the shrubbery, which become more pronounced as the album progresses.

It's to be hoped that this collaboration isn't a one-off, for Cross and Keeling have clearly tapped into something rather special here.

Oz Hardwick

THE OCTOBER GAME

★★★★

Wildblood

(CARMANDIE RECORDS) www.theoctobergame.com



This Bedfordshire quartet has come on considerably in the last few years – the promising autumnal bluster of their early recordings has since blossomed into a stirring proposition that suits the post-Mercury niche carved out by Elbow down to the ground.

Never ones to rush into things, their second album opens with a breathtakingly beautiful orchestral overture, before the lurching spider-bar hook of 'Greenbacks' displays a confidence that ought to be far beyond their years. Luke Williams's phrasing and diction bears comparison with the emotive musicality of Nizlopi's Luke Concannon, giving the band a sensitive focal point around which to weave their considered arrangements.

Evidently laboured over with loving precision from start to finish, *Wildblood* is an impressive effort with a keen sense of when to hold back

on the broader musical brushstrokes in order to reap their maximum impact. Indeed, while not quite the finished article just yet (there are a few unremarkable songs scattered throughout, and the swelling crescendo of centrepiece 'Something Wrong' is perhaps a little too calculated to be truly overwhelming), the recent breakthrough of Mumford & Sons suggests that the time could be just right for a fresh wave of literate, warm-hearted bands to make themselves heard.

Chris Carter

SHEARWATER

★★★★★

The Golden Archipelago

(MATADOR) www.myspace.com/shearwater



Listening to the majestic new album from Austin's Shearwater, it's hard to believe that the band began life as a side project for

Okkervil River's Will Sheff and Jonathan Meiburg. Sheff stepped aside a few albums ago, leaving Meiburg to steer the ship with assistance from Thor Harris and Kimberly Burke, and Shearwater has evolved spectacularly since. 2007's *Rook* was a landmark recording that eclipsed even Okkervil River's greatest achievements, and *The Golden Archipelago* remarkably threatens to go one better.

Meiburg is a keen ornithologist and his studies have taken him to some of the world's most remote islands. *The Golden Archipelago* draws from these experiences and examines the fragility of island life. The theme is loose enough to allow plenty of room for contemplation, and Meiburg's lyrics never come across as preachy. The album is not without its heartbreaking moments, however. The beautiful anthem of the Bikini Atoll islanders that introduces 'Meridian' is all the more poignant when you consider their forced evacuation in the name of American post-WWII nuclear testing.

With shades of melancholy and gentle optimism, *The Golden Archipelago* frequently conjures up the natural beauty of the remote habitats that inspired it. It's a tremendous achievement by a very special band.

David Coleman

OCEAN COLOUR SCENE

★★★★★

Saturday

(COOKING VINYL) www.oceancolourszene.com



Those who recall Birmingham mod-rockers Ocean Colour Scene from their Britpop heyday may be wondering what the band has been up to for the past ten years. Those who remained faithful, though, will know that they've never been far from the recording studio. Their recent trend for releasing an album every two years has been broken by *Saturday*, which comes almost three years after 2007's *On The Layline* – but it's well worth the wait.

In the likes of 'Mrs Maylie' and 'Saturday' it's possible to hear the potent blend of rock, pop and folk that has made them so popular on the live scene since 1996's *Moseley Shoals*, but there are some surprises in store for those who only know the band from their charting hits. 'Old Pair Of Jeans' is a bluesy boogie through classic Americana, while 'Postal' is a shocking angst-fuelled burst of punk distortion.

What's most remarkable about *Saturday*, however, is the fact that there's barely a dull moment among its fourteen tracks. Ocean Colour Scene may be celebrating their twentieth

year together in 2010 but they haven't begun sounding stale yet. This is one Britpop band that truly deserves a popular revival.

Dan Coxon

PANIC ROOM

★★★★★

Satellite

(FIREFLY) www.panicroom.org.uk



When we reviewed Panic Room's debut album, *Visionary Position*, back in 2008, we noted their lineage through various progressive

ensembles (Karnataka, Mostly Autumn, and Fish's band) and heard them as part of a refreshingly new approach to the genre – livelier and more engaging than traditional exponents. Two years on, and they're back with a strong second offering that eschews genre in favour of a wide-ranging sense of expression and some really luscious tunes.

Their twin strengths lie in the consummate musicianship of the band and the silky-smooth, confidently intimate vocals of Anne-Marie Helder; these strengths are perfectly entwined in Panic Room's cosmopolitan night-time gloss on songs such as the heartbreaking, beautiful unburdening of 'The Fall' and the warm afterglow of 'Muse'.

Captivating as these quiet moments are, the intriguing interstellar design of the accompanying booklet paints a bolder ambition, one that is also envisaged through *Satellite* and particularly 'Dark Star'; not exactly space rock but using key elements of space rock to broaden out their sound and lyrical visions. 'Dark Star' really pounds out its rhythms, loud and direct, whilst 'Satellite', almost anthemic, plays out a set of very well conceived material with a confident sense of purpose.

Ian Abrahams

DOWNLINERS SECT

★★★★★

Chinese Whispers

(IMS) www.downlinerssect.com



Trying to nutshell the Sect is akin to trying to do the same for London. Is it Oxford Street, Heston service station or the Old Kent Road?

Originally, they operated simultaneously as a comedy act and as a Stones-inspired r'n'b outfit, tackling a wide spectrum from gutbucket Delta exorcisms to the frontiers of mainstream pop, notably with 1964's revival of The Coasters' 'Little Egypt', a huge hit *sur le continent*. Before disbanding in 1967, the Sect also embraced C&W, soul, horror-rock, folk and more besides, much of it self-composed.

Since mainstays Don Craine and Keith Grant-Evans re-formed the ensemble in 1976, they've released many intriguing albums and handsomely packaged *Chinese Whispers* might represent an artistic apotheosis. Among highlights are Keith's rousing 'Pirate Song' finale – crossing Bo Diddley with a capstan shanty – and Don's 'Casino Mescal', disciplined lyrical reportage that, paradoxically, would be weakened by stronger melodic elaboration.

While those may exemplify hitherto uncharted musical terrain, 'She's Mean', 'Cold Steel' and 'You Can't Take It With You' – each penned by lead guitarist Del Dwyer and drummer Alan Brooks (who, sadly, died in January) – are closer to what a fan who hasn't heard much of the Sect since the mid-1960s might more easily imagine them sounding like nowadays.

Alan Clayton

THE WILDEBEESTS

★★★★★

The Gnus Of Gnavarone

(DIRTY WATER) www.thewildebeests.co.uk



The demise last spring of London's premier garage-punk bolthole, the Dirty Water Club, was an unexpected loss. However, its sister label has thankfully gone from strength to strength with a series of authentically grimy releases, and this newbie from The Wildebeests is no exception.

A supergroup of sorts, the Edinburgh-based band calls upon the joint forces of The Kaisers' John Gibbs, Lenny Helsing of The Thanes and Russ Wilkins, ex-Milkshakes and currently trading as Lord Rochester. Together they cook up one hell of a stew, licked into shape on this occasion by legendary Spanish producer Jorge Explosion.

Rippling with analogue reverb, *The Gnus Of Gnavarone* (great title!) consists mainly of original songs but is effectively a sonic travelogue of some of the best garage and r'n'b licks from 1964 onwards, taking in The Small Faces, The Downliners Sect, The Pretty Things, freakbeat, B-movie horror and, on 'One Minute's Time', The Just Brothers' much sampled Northern Soul floor-filler 'Sliced Tomatoes'. Rather than maintaining the pace throughout, they just keep turning up the gas the further they go, while a fiery rehash of Wimple Winch's classic 'Save My Soul' is just gravy.

Gerry Ranson

BRUCE GUTHRO

★★★★

No Final Destination

(RIDGE) www.bruceguthro.com



If you're expecting Runrig by any other name, allow me to disabuse you of that notion. This is mid-Atlantic rock recorded in Nashville,

Denmark and Nova Scotia with musicians whose names won't ring any immediate bells. Bruce's fourth solo album is his first on the Ridge label and the first to be readily available in the

Insight

"I wanted to perform for people. That much I knew. Any time I'd see a performance, I found myself with a great feeling of longing and belonging. I knew it was what I should be doing." This is American singer **Michele Ari** explaining how she became a musician. At a recent gig in Chicago someone asked her, "How do you just get up there and perform like that?" Ari, who, by her own admission, had just executed "a few rolls on the floor and other moves unbecoming of a lady", had her answer ready: "I don't think about it. I'm here to have fun. If I think about it, if I worry about the possibility of looking stupid, it's all over."

Ari takes her inspiration from the late 70s and early 80s, music she finds "unique, rebellious, spirited and forward-thinking"; Elvis Costello, Blondie, Patti Smith, The Clash, The Damned. "Give me Psychedelic Furs, Kate Bush, Robyn Hitchcock and I am content and inspired," she says. "They all resonate with me lyrically, musically and in style, ideals and attitudes. They are all *different*. There's nothing cookie-cutter about any of them. Creating music that is not faddish or could soon become irrelevant is important to me." "Faddish" and "irrelevant" in Ari's book means someone like Tila Tequila, the MTV 'reality' show starlet.

Many of her fans are old punk rockers and they tell her that she fills a void in today's music. "When I look around for contemporaries I struggle to find them." There is a classic directness, a renunciation of artifice in her work, which perhaps explains why her first album, *85th And Nowhere*, was recorded to analogue and mixed to digital, just like *Buena Vista Social Club*. She likes things "a bit *primitif*", as she puts it. That debut recording, described by Ari as "a love story from start to stop, cover to cover and inside and out" attracted attention in the UK – though sadly we have yet to see her tour on this side of the Pond.

She believes there's more acceptance of left-field artists in Britain than the US, hence her fanbase here. I was drawn in by one particular song on the album,

'Nevermind', and its opening lines: 'Woke up in last night's make-up, wearing last night's dress'. "It's definitely a song about loneliness," she admits, "a bit of madness and the downward slide you can go on when you lose your integrity in a futile pursuit."

She's lived all over – Florida, Chicago and Atlanta. She's now based in Nashville, but not because she's on a country music jag. "There's a lot of music going on here every night of the week. So, if you need to get out and get some juices flowing it's very easy to do so. It's a place for me to hang my hat, hone my skills, find musicians to work with and places to record, all of which I have done and am doing. In that way being here has affected my own music because it's rich with the resources that I need."

Ari's feelings about Britain are reflected in a couple of songs on *Mal A'Propos*, her new EP: 'Atom Bombs' and 'Transatlantic Love Affair'. The new work she describes as "cleaner than *85th*. It's more pop and punk, though not a blend of the two". On '6am', the opening track, she seems to be heading for rock-disco territory, another retro genre. As for that French title, which she translates as "out of place", is that how you feel, I asked... like you don't fit in? "24/7. Don't you?" was her comeback.

Phillip Ward



rawk for a joke that starts to wear a bit thin by the time we get to a sing-along 'Sweet Child Of Mine'. A soft landing into air guitar-playing's most heroic moments; it's perhaps one for mum's stocking next Yule.

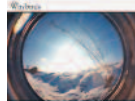
Peter Muir

THE WHYBIRDS

★★★★★

Cold Blue Sky

(THE LITTLE RED RECORDING COMPANY) www.thewhybirds.com



In the early 1980s it looked as if new wave and electro-funk had rendered the great rock styles of the 60s and 70s obsolete, so it's very heartening to see the torch passed on to much younger generations.

The Whybirds' style is country-tinged, hard-rocking, very American boogie: Allman Brothers, Lynyrd Skynyrd, E Street Band and – perhaps especially – Crazy Horse. Very well do The Whybirds perform it, too: all four members play with skill and spirit; each sings well, and each writes decent songs, resulting in an album of even and impressive quality. The whole project is refreshingly uncompromising: no 21st century electronica adulteration, no post-modern irony. They even look the part with their jeans, beards, and long hair. Furthermore, The Whybirds are actually English.

The Whybirds are great live, yet *Cold Blue Sky* proves that their music can work at home, too. If you're in a mood for rocking out with some beers, what better style is there? The sentiments conveyed are far more authentic and gutsy than those of heavy metal or US stadium rock. I hope Neil Young hears this album: he'd know just where to go if he's ever seeking a UK pick-up band.

Rycharad Carrington

JUPITER ONE

★★★★★

Sunshower

(RYKODISC) www.myspace.com/jupiterone



The second album from the New York pop outfit is all jangly guitars and sumptuous harmonies – a breath of sonic air that evokes the tougher spirit of The Beach Boys and The Flaming Lips.

They know their way round a good chorus, nowhere more so than on the opening 'Volcano' and 'Anna'. Add to that the swirling 'Lights Go Out' and the shimmering, folksy single, 'Flaming Arrow', which recalls Elliott Smith, and you've got an intoxicating brew.

'Simple Stones' boasts an alluring rhythm track with a bass line of which Chic's Bernard Edwards would be proud, while the anthemic 'Come On' could be the sound of summer. You have been warned!

David Burke

THE LEN PRICE 3

★★★★★

Pictures

(WICKED COOL) www.myspace.com/thelenprice3



Whatever they put in the water down in Kent's Medway area, it can't be denied that it's a fiery tippie that's allowed them to pretty much corner the market in guttersnipe garage-rock racket. However, while Billy Childish *et al* have fought tooth and nail to

maintain the earthy purity of the form, right down to crackly amps and untuneable guitars, The Len Price 3 have spent their time sweating over perfecting the sound rather than poring over valve catalogues.

On *Pictures*, their third album, and second for Miami Steve Van Zandt's Wicked Cool label, precision is the key. To be sure, it fairly crackles with the infectious pop-punk energy of early Who records, particularly on the title track with its clanging chords and tumbling Moon-esque tom-toms. But where the band succeeds is in the mimicry of the age. From The Kinks to The Creation, you'll find their influence here. And in its trumpet fanfare, 'Mr Grey' even respectfully tugs a forelock to the Fab Four.

Mixed nice and loud, *Pictures* is indeed a great, vibrant, garage-pop album although purists may wish to approach with caution.

Gerry Ranson

MIDLAKE

★★★★★

The Courage Of Others

(BELLA UNION) www.bellaunion.co.uk



After a record such as *The Trials Of Van Occupanther*, and the interim triumphs of label-mates The Low Anthem and Fleet Foxes,

this was potentially going to be a difficult one. The fear was less of a poor record than of merely a decent one, or even *Van Occupanther II*.

Well, they've done none of those things, and while remaining in their special world, more rustic and stately, now they embrace a gentle pantheism, and though unheralded this is a green album; they sing of the earth broken open, the rise and fall of a mountain, and call on Man to change his ways.

The West Coast harmonies are shed and aspects of English psych-folk embraced. Guitar predominates from the beautiful, captivating intro to 'Acts Of Men' onward until for a moment, at the start of 'The Horn', you might think you're listening to *Terrapin Station* or *Liege & Lief*, but there's also a deal of harpsichord, flute, bassoon and violin.

Unlike *Van Occupanther* this is not an immediate record; it's too sedate for that and the first impulse may be a slight deflation, but that soon dissipates, replaced with the fresh wonder that they've done it again.

Nick West

NICK CAVE & WARREN ELLIS

★★★★★

The Road

(MUTE RECORDS) www.nickcaveandwarrenellis.com



Soundtrack albums that aren't loaded with familiar songs can be difficult; very few original scores travel well when removed from

the context of the cinema experience.

But *The Road* is an exception. It works in the same way that Michael Nyman's *The Piano* worked, because the mostly spare arrangements, piano and violin, paint immensely evocative pictures of desolation. And it doesn't get any more desolate than Cormac McCarthy's apocalyptic Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about a father and son travelling through a ruined landscape towards the salvation of the sea, a ruined landscape in which the threat of cannibal gangs is heightened here by disturbing loops and eerie, frenetic percussion. This is a masterpiece of its genre.

David Burke

SKUFFLE

★★★★★

Skuffle

(JOEY'S JUKEBOX) www.joeyjukebox.com



This landed too late for the Christmas issue but that's assuredly where it belongs. A 'supergroup' drollery on the part of (session mainstays of London musicals) Sean Kingsley, Shan Chana, Steve McManus and Kevin Healy, it's essentially an acoustic re-tread of sixteen of rock's greatest

iconic guitar-based songs. Pause for screams of "Heresy!" but in the main it works well.

Much-loved standards such as 'Black Night', 'Pinball Wizard', 'All Right Now' and 'Eye Of The Tiger' dodge being denigrated rock-lite by the proficiency of musicianship, and distinguished from being mere acoustic adaptation by Chana's percussion battery (including the titular Peruvian skuffle box itself) and the presence of tabla giant Kuljit Bhamra in an array of supporting talent that puts meat back onto the bones of songs not best known for their delicacy.

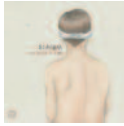
It could have done with being briefer and Sean Kingsley's belter of a voice is simply too

SEABEAR

★★★★

We Built A Fire

(MORR MUSIC) www.myspace.com/seabear



What began as a lo-fi solo project for Icelandic singer Sindri Már Sigfússon has taken on its own life in the wake of debut album *The Ghost That Carried Us Away*, which garnered international press coverage and had tracks featured on *Gossip Girl*. Since then, the project has morphed into a septet, with all members being involved in their own multi-media projects.

Their follow up, *We Built A Fire*, was written and recorded as a collective but, despite these varying artistic backgrounds, there's little evidence of personality clashes or runaway egos over the course of the album's eleven tracks. Falling under the broad umbrella of indie-folk, there are hints of Tilly And The Wall in upbeat numbers such as 'Fire Dies Down', while the cute folk of 'Wooden Teeth' is reminiscent of Noah And The Whale.

Elsewhere, these influences are joined by hints of post-rock. The downbeat 'Cold Summer', which is like a folk-tinged Maps, and 'We Fell Off The Roof' with its Peter Broderick whispery vocals, maintains warmth through string and brass that experiment with non-indulgent Arcade Fire mini-orchestration.

A charming, if inconsequential release, it will probably seep into wider public consciousness via another ITV2 teen drama.

Susan Darlington

THE DOWN-FI

★★★

America Now

(GUSTAV GROUP) www.myspace.com/thedownfi



Membership of the seminal Cleveland, Ohio band Rocket From The Tombs is a pretty good thing to have on your CV. Various members of that band went on to Pere Ubu and The Dead Boys. However, guitarist Craig Willis Bell upped sticks to Indianapolis where, in due course, he founded the Down-Fi.

Sadly, *America Now* features none of the skewed or experimental rock'n'roll of those bands. Instead, Bell leads his quartet through a handful of blue-collar bar band would-be anthems. There's no questioning the band's enthusiasm: Willis delivers his lyrics with a mildly angry snarl, and the guitars crunch with gusto. But for all that, there are occasional tuning and timing problems, while the frantically busy drumming often threatens to derail the proceedings.

At best sounding like a collection of Warren Zevon outtakes, there is certainly nothing wrong with being a bar band, and chances are there's nothing here that can't be fixed. But until then the bar is just about the best place for it.

Gerry Ranson

LAST HARBOUR

★★★★

Volo

(LITTLE RED RABBIT RECORDS) www.lastharbour.co.uk



The latest offering from cult doom-balladeers Last Harbour is as much a product of Wild Beasts and Spacemen 3 producer Richard Formby as of the band itself. Written, for the most part, during the actual recording

process and then handed over to Formby to do with it as he saw fit, the resulting album is a dark, swirling vortex of weeping strings, pounding drums and distant feedback that sustains a brooding sense of menace from the moment its eerie spoken-word intro slinks into earshot.

Oddly for a band based in Manchester, *Volo* bears little resemblance to any of the city's major musical exports, instead inhabiting a world more akin to dusty *noir* Westerns and the desolate landscape of Scott Walker. However, when Kevin Craig croons 'I'm a receiver/I hear your transmission' over the funereal 'Mount Analogue', it's impossible not to feel the spectre of Ian Curtis gazing solemnly over proceedings.

While it's fair to say that the album rarely makes for cheery listening, there's something oddly hypnotic about its gothic soul-searching, plunging the listener into a sordid living hell in which Nick Cave and Patti Smith find themselves alone in an empty room, torn between the bottle and a gun.

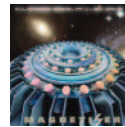
Chris Carter

INVERSE GRAVITY VEHICLE

★★★★

Magnetiser

(INVERSE GRAVITY VEHICLE) www.inversegravityvehicle.com



A double disc that inevitably starts with 'the science bit', InVerse Gravity Vehicle grew out of vocalist and synth player Deborah Knights and synth player Joie Hinton's shared interest in the work of John Searl, 'the Grandfather of inverse gravity'. No, me neither . . .

However, though I may not be up to speed on the *Tomorrow's World* front, I know an engrossing swirl of electronic swooshiness when I hear one – as do the assembled crew here. Hinton, of course, was in at the start of Ozric Tentacles before moving on to the harder-edged Eat Static, and there are guest appearances by, amongst others, Ozrics mainstay Ed Wynne and Here And Now's Steffe Sharpstrings and Keith 'Missile Bass' Bailey.

With Knights' vocals floating in and out of the mix, the first disc is very much the ambient trip you'd perhaps expect from the assembled cast. The second disc offers a more varied menu, from the piano-based 'Friendly Fire' to the distorted clang and buzz of 'Rapper Slapper', via the frankly silly – though elegantly attired – 'Tough Love', which although interesting in themselves, don't really hang together as an album.

Oz Hardwick

PETER BARTON AND JERRY DONAHUE

★★★★

Fallen

(ORGANIC MOUNTAIN) www.rockartistmanagement.com



On the boards, the multi-faceted Mr Barton is a Boomtown Rat, mainstay of a Creedence Clearwater Revival tribute band and frontman of the latter-day Animals. Each recital is centred on the respective act's classics played in the good old way with all the attendant mannerisms – because, fundamentally, that's all the customers want to hear.

Without doubt, they'd be nonplussed by the reworking of 'House Of The Rising Sun' that closes Peter's striking amalgam with folk-rock behemoth Donahue who, during a busy sixty-odd years on this planet, has picked

guitar for Fairport Convention, Fotheringay, Joan Armatrading, Ralph McTell, you name 'em. Indeed, a small army of former colleagues, including Gerry Conway, Dave Pegg and Dave Mattacks, turn up on *Fallen* as do the disparate likes of Zoot Money, Clive Bunker, Jim Rodford and Rick Wakeman.

Save for a brace of so-so Donahue instrumentals, the resulting nine originals here display promise in Barton's assured baritone and what amounts to his first attempts at composition. Motoring through the night I found myself singing 'Looking For The Light', and the next afternoon I was driven to delve into the package's booklet for the intriguing lyrical nuances of 'The Runner', from an album that at the very least engenders hope that there'll be a follow-up.

Alan Clayson

NORTH ATLANTIC OSCILLATION

★★★★

Drawing Maps From Memory

(KSCOPE) www.kscope.com



NAO have been executing an astute profile-raising strategy over the last year, issuing a debut EP, supporting high-profile acts,

Porcupine Tree for one, and generally enjoying a steady stream of supportive music press attention. All systems go for their first album, but what to make of it?

Well, it's bright in an understated, lo-fi, way; predicated on programming and synths with a firm but coarse guitar grinding underneath; experimental in a thoughtful manner . . . and a bit lacking in personality if I'm honest. The comparisons being made with a technologically aware Brian Wilson are a pretty fair analogy – their sense of melody really hits the sweet spot at times and they're unafraid to place layer over gossamer layer to create a quite cleverly realised brittleness.

On the other hand, it's a bit of a wash-across-canvas effect that's achieved here – aural pleasantries that are highly listenable but leave the listener feeling that there was more transparency than depth. A reviewer's nightmare – this could well be an album that grows in value with each playing and there's definitely more than just 'something' about this intelligent three-piece. I was unsatisfied yet still want to hear where they go next.

Ian Abrahams

BLYTH POWER

★★★★★

Land Sea & Sky

(DOWNWARDE SPIRAL) www.blythpower.co.uk



Joseph Porter and his band have ploughed their highly individual furrow for twenty-five years now – a form of punk-folk with strong tunes and wordy lyrics, mostly about kings, wars and trains.

Many of the thirteen songs on this album have appeared before in acoustic form, but are revisited here with the full band. Fred Purser's production creates a solid wall of sound centred on Annie Hatcher's swirling keyboards and Steven Cooper's guitar.

It's an excellent album: sixty-three minutes of Joseph's original compositions, plus a version of Macaulay's poem 'Naseby', and a positively jaunty interpretation of the traditional song 'The Mermaid'. As ever, Joseph is credited with all vocals, though on

'Follow The Band' it's a surprise to hear the distinctive voice of Mick Tyas (from the late, lamented Whisky Priests) take the lead.

There are plenty of words on the album – Joseph probably gives you more for your money than anyone, and who else would include the line 'In consequence negotiations I disdain'? But the strong melodies and great sing-along choruses prevent it from getting bogged down. Nowadays, Blyth Power gigs are as rare as hen's teeth but try to catch these songs live if you can.

Ian Croft

MONKEY ISLAND

★★★★★

Luxe Et Redux

(IMPRINT) www.monkeyisland.com



Although Hackney's Monkey Island are often mentioned in connection with the thriving London garage-blues scene, *Luxe Et Redux* is evidence

that there's far more to them than meets the eye. From the stark monochrome Modernist artwork and the anthemic metalness of the opening instrumental 'Back To The Stoneage', it's clear that something's a bit different. But when Pete Bennett's wild guitar and howling harp kick in, we're starting to get a look at the bigger picture.

What Monkey Island have done is to take the form and completely deconstruct it. They blow the dust out of its pipes, bolt on a few extra parts – the angular structures of Wire; the ranting vocals of Mark E Smith; the earthy quaintness of English folksong. They've then added their own spit and polish and created something wholly new.

Sure, it's garage. As with The Fall, the spectre of The Sonics is never far away. But at the same time, the band takes 60s US street-punk and puts a weird spin on it. And the end result? Something lean, mean and utterly magnificent. 'Ave a banana!

Gerry Ranson

EFTERKLANG

★★★★★

Magic Chairs

(4AD) www.efterklang.net



Magic Chairs marks the beginning of a new chapter for Copenhagen's Efterklang, following last year's move from The Leaf Label to 4AD.

It might only be the band's third studio album since forming in 2000 but Efterklang's level of industry is renowned. As well as touring extensively and performing with a number of orchestras, the band has released several EPs and a fantastic live album, and its members also run the highly successful indie label Rumraket. Thankfully, they can still find sufficient time in their schedules to write and record phenomenal music like this.

Magic Chairs is certainly the most immediately accessible effort of the quartet's career, but that's not to say it's a straightforward album. Repeated listens reveal added layers of complexity, and only with a decent set of headphones do the finer details of tracks like the jittery 'Raincoats' begin to become apparent. This is music far beyond any lazy genre tag – post-rock really doesn't do it justice – and it genuinely has something for everyone, with stunning melodies, innovative rhythms, and skilled production. It looks like 4AD has hit the jackpot once again.

David Coleman

TURIN BRAKES

★★★★

Outbursts

(COOKING VINYL) www.turinbrakes.com



Those who harbour fond memories of Turin Brakes' Mercury Prize-nominated debut, *The Optimist LP*, would do well to seek out copies of this, their fifth studio album. Turning away from the soft-rock sound of 2007's *Dark On Fire*, Olly Knights and Gale Paridjanian have rediscovered their folksy acoustic roots, to powerful effect.

That's not to say that *Outbursts* is without its flaws. First single 'The Sea Change' opens the album with soaring harmonies and catchy pseudo-apocalyptic lyrics, and 'Mirror' follows it up with an instantly anthemic chorus, but the quality slowly declines as the album progresses.

There's still plenty to enjoy in *Outbursts*, though, and those opening tracks are among the best the duo has recorded. 'The Sea Change' in particular deserves a place alongside their 2003 hit 'Pain Killer'. It's just a shame that they can't sustain that magic for a full forty-five minutes – now that really would have been an album worth hearing.

David Coxon

MANFRED MANN'S EARTH BAND

★★★★

Bootleg Archives Volumes 1-5

(COHESION) www.manfredmann.com



Arguably the best Manfred Mann line-up was helmed by Paul Jones; he's certainly the figure indelibly linked with their success in the

60s. Jones did the right thing and got out before things grew predictable. South African keyboard player Mann might have been better off letting the band lie when he dissolved it in 1969 rather than reviving it, firstly as Manfred Mann Chapter Three and then as Manfred Mann's Earth Band.

It's the latter incarnation that features on this warts-and-all collection of bootlegs from 1981 to 2007, culled from various sources including fan, sound desk and studio recordings. Yes, there are some rarities, as well as the previously unreleased 'Hello Hello', but does that really justify a five-CD boxed set? Methinks not.

David Burke

THE FLOE

★★★★

No Looking Back

(NETTLE RECORDS) www.thefloe.co.uk



Marking their arrival on the scene with this impressive debut, The Floe is an AOR four-piece from Essex.

Immediately prior to going into the studio to record *No Looking Back*, lead singer Sarah Springett learned that her boyfriend, Paul Shepherd, needed a kidney transplant to save his life. Bravely, Sarah donated one of hers and the resulting operations were a complete success.

The opening track here – a syncopated slice of power pop, 'I Hope You Know' – penned by Springett and Dave Booth (the band's in-house songsmiths) was written after these events and released as a single with all profits going

to the Transplant Trust, while Springett also mounted a personal campaign to encourage people to sign up to the NHS Organ Donor Register. The tune provides a stirring marker for all that follows here.

Blessed by Springett's distinctive vocals (occasional shades of Thea Gilmore in her phrasing), The Floe's remaining personnel – Dave Booth (guitar), Simon Edgoose (drums) and Liz Townsend (multi-instrumentalist, vocals) – form a versatile ensemble whose songs, such as 'Not What Knocks You Down', 'Treading Water' and a slowed-down version of '(Love Is Like A) Heatwave' give them every chance of mainstream success.

Colin Hall

ARCH GARRISON

★★★★

King Of The Down

(DOUBLE SIX RECORDS) www.myspace.com/archgarrison



Established largely to perform the compositions of its musical director Craig Fortnam, the cross-disciplinary North Sea Radio

Orchestra is renowned for its inventive fusion of contemporary classical music, folk, poetry and even rock music to create soundscapes of sweeping grandeur and epic lyricism.

Arch Garrison could be seen as the cottage industry version of that as Fortnam (here with occasional vocal help from his wife Sharron) presents us with *King Of The Down*, a compelling musical journey that is inspired by, and includes songs about, Roman roads, ancient landscapes and major river systems but which also touches on more abstract subjects such as mental health problems.

With a distinctive sound evolved from Fortnam's nylon- and steel-strung guitar playing and his use of a vintage Philicorda organ together with synths and percussion, *King Of The Down* is a deceptively simple sounding album that gradually unwinds to reveal its many layers. Utterly entrancing, it's a beautifully understated collection of 21st century folk songs performed in an indefinable but distinctly English style that brings to mind bands such as Caravan at their most pastoral.

Dave Haslam

ELVA SNOW

★★★★

Elva Snow

(GLITTERHOUSE) www.glitterhouse.com



A collaborative effort by sometime Morrissey sideman Spencer Cobrin and Australian singer Scott Matthew, Elva Snow

produced a couple of EPs in what we're encouraged to call the early *noughties*. Glitterhouse have now anthologised these and added a couple of recent songs to make an interesting, if a little uneven, entity.

Initial thoughts are that it's setting out to be that perennial A&R man's dream – a new Jeff Buckley. Certain tracks do have that chiming, soaring transcendence but, frankly, Matthew's voice doesn't quite settle on a fixed style – with a resultant frustration. There're pleasing hints of a John Croke or Chris Mills, but at times it gets too close to Tony Hadley.

Opener 'Pavement Kisses' begins with a riveting, hoarse whisper that's too quickly abandoned although, despite that disappointment, the song grows impressively and is one of the undoubted successes. 'Shimmer' has

a nice vibrancy close to power-pop, and an appropriate span, while 'Drinking And Driving' inhabits Richard Hawley's universe though the song peters out before it comes to its close.

The new songs, 'Last Drink' and 'Hollywood Ending', are comparatively downbeat and almost elegiac, perhaps carrying more-real emotion in consequence.

Nick West

RDA

★★★★

Recommended Daily Allowance

(SHAKEWELL RECORDS) www.myspace.com/recommendeddailyallowance



Recommended Daily Allowance's debut album opens with a pleasant, orchestral folk track that's not dissimilar to The Shins.

With its hazy strings and brass, 'Picture Club' does not prepare the listener for what subsequently predominates: jazz with trace elements of funk.

Laid down in one take, the release sees the London/Newcastle trio move from The Police giving a full body search to Daniel Merriweather, on 'Malcolm', to The Stereophonics' Kelly Jones fronting Steely Dan, on 'Feeder'. 'Chiang Mai' and 'Little Girl', meanwhile, are the kind of jazz more usually heard in a wine bar. This lounge lizard quality is nailed to a woody pop arrangement on 'Believe', the only other track to bear any resemblance to the opener.

It's this ability to keep the worst excesses of the genre in check that unites these eleven tracks, the solid song structures showcasing their fluid playing while remaining within the broad pop concept. More Jamie Lidell than John Coltrane, there's still only so much one can take and as such the recommended daily allowance would be no more than two tracks at any given sitting.

Susan Darlington

SOLEX VS. CRISTINA MARTINEZ + JON SPENCER

★★★★

Amsterdam Showdown, King Street Throwdown!

(BRONZERAT RECORDS) www.myspace.com/solexmusic



Taking a leaf out of The Postal Service's collaborative textbook, this madcap effort is the product of some feverish cross-continental

FedEx-ing between Amsterdam and New York which daftly pitches itself as "the defining sound of 2020".

As one might expect from such playful musical sources, it's a restless and busy collection whose anything-goes approach sends the songs spinning into all sorts of wacky dimensions. 'R Is For Ring-A-Ding' has a funky, Jurassic 5-esque vibe whose bouncing verses give way to a colourful sound collage recalling Beck's *Odelay!* while 'The Uppercut' is a too-cool Blaxploitation strut hinging on a sleazy 'Eye Of The Tiger' skit. Stabs of jaunty Stax brass give the stew a little flavour and the whole thing bubbles along nicely like test tubes in a scientist's lab.

However, while there's little point attempting to over-analyse the trio's tongue-in-cheek fusion of funk, soul, hip-hop and psychobilly, too often the tracks hit upon a winning groove but fail to lead it anywhere,

instead chucking everything into the pot with scant regard for a coherent exit strategy. Like most freewheeling side-projects, it ultimately suffers from an abundance of ideas that, spread across fifteen fairly interchangeable tracks, quickly becomes rather exhausting.

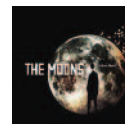
Chris Carter

THE MOONS

★★★★

Life On Earth

(ACID JAZZ) www.myspace.com/themoonsofficial



Good, old-fashioned songwriting is alive and kicking and here's the honest-to-goodness proof, courtesy of Paul Weller's erstwhile keyboard player, Andy Crofts, and cohorts, with their everyday songs of everyday people in, yep, everyday situations.

Take 'Wondering' for example, and not just because Weller is sitting in and tinkling the ivories, since recording for this album took place at his studio, but because it's that kind of hands-in-pocket, chirpy but reflective number that sums up the slightly eccentric vein of Englishness pervading Crofts's songs. It's as if he took a direct line from Ray Davies to Andy Partridge, detoured a little and rubbed shoulders with Tommy Steele, then concocted a collection of songs that quietly captured the average man journeying through life and meeting its challenges with a wry sense of humour and an acceptance of its ups and downs.

Smashing little numbers played with gusto and feeling, such as the bar room barracking belter 'Chinese Whispers' and the frantic knees-up of 'The Ragman', have a timeless ease about them. An astute Acid Jazz took up The Moons on the strength of the band's self-financed single, 'Don't Go Changin'".

Ian Abrahams

UB40

★

Best Of Labour Of Love

(VIRGIN/EMI) www.emimusic.co.uk



Remember the grey-mackintosh post-punk adventure that was the early 80s? Margaret Thatcher newly elected and musicians

falling over themselves to create relevant, vibrant and innovative music – Elvis Costello, The Specials, The Clash, Joy Division. Into the mix came UB40's first album, *Signing Off*, all done up like a dole card, dubby and melodic and full of politics and anger. It sparked, shone and grooved, and proved that it was okay for a bunch of white blokes to play reggae (previously I'd witnessed bands trying to 'do reggae' by exclaiming 'Jah!' during instrumental breaks).

And then UB40 settled down and relaxed, and turned into a smoothly successful covers band, adding their offbeat *chinka chinka* to any number of popular songs, selling bucketloads and leaving me to wander off muttering about the Falklands War and the Miners' Strike while they eulogised their red, red wine.

A little harsh perhaps, but that formulaic UB40 sound, showcased here in what is basically a 'greatest covers' collection, is so numbingly unnoticeable (at best) and downright unattractive (at worst) that I'm inclined to get down to the record shop and buy that first album on CD.

Boff Whalley

Reissues and compilations

WOLF PEOPLE

★★★★★

Tidings

(JAGJAGUWAR) www.myspace.com/wolfpeople



These Home Counties youngsters have been making such a name for themselves over the last couple of years, with their drop-out fusion of heavy psych blues, acid folk and Krautrock, that they've now been snapped up by happening US indie Jagjaguwar. The band's long-awaited debut album is still some way off but in the meantime, this vinyl-only stopgap boasts tracks from their first three EPs for the Battered Ornaments label.

Tidings captures Wolf People inchoate, both in content and line-up. Barely finished songs arise and take flight from the surface of a sea of found sounds, tape effects and ghostly voices, as ancient madrigals morph into meandering wah-guitar solos against monkish incantation and woody flute.

Rarely summoning the groove of the live Wolf People experience and giving scant indication of the intricacies of the band's ensemble playing, this sonic melting pot does succeed in embracing the truly psychedelic. Let there be no mistake, *Tidings* is a trip, and one that raises great hope for the future.

Gerry Ranson

A4-ish hardback book chronicling his career and detailing all the sessions. The six CDs nestling therein cover Holly's entire studio recordings, solo and with The Crickets and Bob Montgomery (it is astonishing to reflect that this most influential of professional careers lasted barely three years), along with some fascinating early family home, garage and apartment tapes. Many of these were first issued after Holly's death – heavily over-dubbed and with varying results. All of those are now here too, for the first time since the 1979 box, together with (and frequently outshone by) all available un-dubbed originals.

McKie says they have used everything still in existence that they had rights to. There are other bits and pieces around (odd additional takes, live cuts and interviews, and his backing of other artists) but these have been well bootlegged and this is clearly the best we're going to get, officially, so I for one will not look this sumptuous gift horse in the mouth.

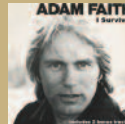
Brian Smith

ADAM FAITH

★★★★★

I Survive

(ANGEL AIR) www.angelair.co.uk



Cover photograph by Snowdon; Ritchie Blackmore, Russ Ballard and Paul McCartney guest; Mickie Most masters... Yet despite Faith's enjoying continued high profile through acting work on TV's *Budgie* and a nicely drawn performance as a corrupting manager in rock film *Stardust*, *I Survive* was received mutely by the public on release in 1975.

Atypical of the cheeky-chappie former 60s pop pin-up, this critically acclaimed if relatively downbeat offering came after a near fatal car crash and was clearly an attempt to 'move on'. Purgative it may have been, but purgatory it is not. Faith and co-writer/producer David Courtney's songs are well polished gems, alternating from the gentle introspection of 'I Believe In Love', 'Honey' and utterly gorgeous 'Change' to bouncing whimsy, shining with good humour, in 'Foreign Lady', 'Goodbye' and catchy if failed single 'I Survived'.

I Survive is closer to the spirit of Bill Fay than Cockney Rebel as otherwise suggested in Nick Dalton's informative notes, but that's no bad

thing. Faith went on to become a financial expert before plunging spectacularly into bankruptcy and dying in 2003. His singing career may have not survived this album, but the critics of the day were on the button.

Peter Muir

DAVE BERRY

★★★★★

This Strange Effect: The Decca Sessions 1963-1966

(RPM)



During the pop watershed year of 1963, Dave Berry and his backing Cruisers were visualised by Decca as torch-bearers of a 'Sheffield Sound' after freelance talent scout Mickie Most supervised a demo taping – though it'd be an in-house producer who'd be issuing orders when the lads assembled in the company's London complex that summer to make a maiden single, 'Memphis Tennessee'.

After it penetrated the top twenty – just, Dave's chart run was typified by the market performances of heartbreak ballad 'The Crying Game' and its sound-alike successor, 'One Heart Between Two'. Aided by TV plugs centred on the charismatic Berry's surreal stagecraft, the first came within an ace of the top while the latter struggled to number forty-one. An inspired cover of Bobby Goldsboro's 'Little Things' and 1966's sentimental 'Mama', however, were each the commercial equal of 'The Crying Game', and 'This Strange Effect' (penned by Ray Davies) remains one of Holland's biggest-selling discs.

These and a retinue of comparative misses, plus all the B-sides, EPs, albums and excerpts from 'various artists' compilations, as well as the hitherto unreleased Most efforts, fill a thoroughly diverting double-CD.

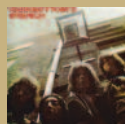
Alan Clayson

'IGGINBOTTOM

★★★★

Igginbottom's Wrench

(ESOTERIC) www.cherryred.co.uk/esoteric



Bradford lads Igginbottom stare moodily into the camera on the cover of this 1969 Deram release. A new Black Sabbath? Another Mott The Hoople? Sweep aside such notions, for beyond

the butch cover art and brutish moniker resides the nascent genius of a modern jazz Hendrix.

An intuitive player of extraordinary dexterity, Allan Holdsworth was on his way to a successful solo career via stints with Soft Machine, Tempest and Bill Bruford when, under the patronage of Ronnie Scott, he and his only-just-post-teen band recorded this essay in tight yet loose and expansive modern jazz with occasional progressive flecking.

Best heard in one sitting, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Music ebbs and flows amidst occasional and expressive stabs of urgency, the players looping pulsing runs of complex *improv* about catchy melodic hooks smoothed along by Holdsworth's light and breathy vocals. An original work springing from a rich palette, just as you start to 'get it', the album fades enigmatically away.

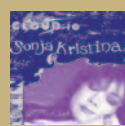
Peter Muir

SONJA KRISTINA

★★★

Harmonics Of Love

(MARKET SQUARE) www.marketsquarerecords.co.uk



Picture the early morning mist hanging still and mysterious over the Vale of Avalon, a quintessential vision of an Albion that permeates the mythology of the land. That's a romanticism that encapsulates Curved Air's Sonja Kristina at this particular point in her career.

There's a sense of ease underpinning her 1995 album, described as Astro Folk' and recorded by her musical compatriots, Cloud 10. The music is beguiling, due in no short measure to the way in which the evocative violin of Paul Sax complements and embellishes Kristina's haunting vocal delivery. It's informed by their multitudinous forays around the festivals and spiritual retreats through most of the 1990s. That the result is an impressionistic wash rather than a collection of individually standout tracks perhaps catches the point rather than detracts from the listening.

Reissued here, it comes complete with bonus tracks that have been chosen for their resonance with the original material – down to the unexpected brittleness of her Motörhead cover, 'Don't Believe A Word', and the spellbinding 'Nightfall' inspired by the classic Asimov sci-fi short story. Some might find it all rather too New Age, but it has honesty and an empathy that is genuinely absorbing.

Ian Abrahams

BUDDY HOLLY

★★★★★

Not Fade Away – The Complete Studio Recordings and More

(HIP-O SELECT) www.bim-bam.com



As Public Domain labels have already started to eat into the Buddy Holly legacy, I was fast giving up ever getting the lavish 'complete works' treatment on CD that Bear Family, in particular, have given to pretty well every other major 50s rock 'n' roller, the nearest we got being a vinyl box thirty years ago. Such sets are particularly thin on the ground in the US, so the work of Andy McKie for Universal's Hip-O Select imprint has been doubly welcome, but they have really gone to town with their long-awaited Holly set.

It takes the form of a sturdy, illustrated,

fired by Yes and brimming righteously with points to prove. With a line-up including the band's organist Tony Kaye, the outcome (notably in fizzing 'Small Beginnings' and 'Roundabout'-sounding 'Children Of The Universe') is inevitably akin to the sound of Banks's former cohorts, by association making this an imperative for fans whilst still good enough to engage the broader-based classic rock nostalgist.

fulfilling a long-held ambition by Way, its four movements showcase expert turns, elegant and feverish, pitched over an orchestral simulacrum from synth-playing fellow Air-man Francis Monkman that build into an affecting work which has aged least of all these releases.

while not sustaining quite the same verve and originality throughout, has assuredness of feel and textural variety that maintain momentum and listening engagement.

ESOTERIC

www.cherryred.co.uk/esoteric

Esoteric's drill down into the deep catalogues of 70s prog exposes fresh gold – real and fool's – while front line reissues give way to band-related projects of sometimes variable and wayward outcome. All come with expansive booklet notes, rare or unpublished pictures and in most cases, bonus tracks. Some add up to being more than merely 'esoteric'.

FLASH

★★★★★

Flash

Flash's 1971's self-titled debut does what its title might suggest with a nicely-balanced offer of showy progressive rock: tight, melodic and exposed with enthusiastic verve by guitarist Peter Banks, fresh from being

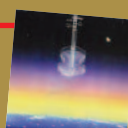


DARRYL WAY

★★★★

Concerto For Electric Violin

Classical themes run deep in the rivers of prog: Curved Air's Darryl Way goes a step further in this homage to his heroes Ravel and Bartok. Recorded in 1978, a 'sod it all' response to being beaten up by punk and



MADE IN SWEDEN

★★★★

Made in England

Esoteric takes its mission overseas and plunders Scandinavian prog further with this accomplished Swedish jazz-rock trio. Fielding an impressively-mustered battery of sound, veering from pop and rock to improvised modern jazz recorded in London, by Colosseum's Tony Reeves, with arrangements by fellow Brit jazz great Neil Ardley, it scorches off with opener 'Winter's A Bummer', and



SUPERSISTER

★★★

Spiral Staircase

Dutch progressive pranksters Supersister had shed both descriptions by the time *Spiral Staircase* was taped in 1974 by two remaining band members – and guests – as a 'loose conceptual album' based around one of the band's finest moments, the B-side of their first single. Whilst it is certainly whimsical, it misses the more structured approach adopted by this band's earlier incarnation and, sadly, fetches up a meandering, unfocused, unfunny swansong.



Peter Muir

Reissues and compilations contd**THE SILKIE**

★★★

You've Got To Hide Your Love Away(HUX) www.huxrecords.com

The Silkie had a surprise hit in 1965 with 'You've Got To Hide Your Love Away', assisted perhaps by the presence of Messrs Lennon,

McCartney and Harrison at the session. They recorded three more singles and an LP before returning to obscurity.

This isn't that LP, *The Silkie Sing The Songs Of Bob Dylan*, although it does include eight

of the twelve tracks. Rather it is a version of their US release expanded with singles, and falls short as an archive by failing to be the complete Silkie.

The look and sound of the band was very Peter, Paul And Mary: a girl singer and men with sculpted beards and thin ties, although they had rather more muscle thanks to Kevin Cunningham's double bass. The decision to hitch their star to Bob Dylan was probably a good one at the time yet they didn't do anything radical with his songs. Their own compositions, including 'Blood Red River' and 'Leave Me To Cry', suggest that they had an original talent that was somehow sidelined.

I must comment on the packaging. Four songs are miscredited and the notes repeat the myth about Pete Seeger taking an axe to the power

cables at Newport. That, together with the missing four tracks, takes the shine off the project. *Dai Jeffries*

VARIOUS

★★★

Shrink To Fit Volume 2: Cotton Pickin' Rockers(SLICK O RAMA) www.barbershoprockabilly.co.uk

A Gretsch-wielding guitar-slinger about town, Steve Hooker is a south Essex legend. He might hide his light under a bushel but for the past thirty years he's kept his highly revered pickin' finger on the pulse. Here, together with sponsorship from stylists to the stars, Slick 50 Barber Shop and Ace Dress O Rama, he's put

together a second volume of soon-to-be classic cuts from the cream of Europe's rockabilly scene, plus a few old mates.

Hooker's raunchy axe lights up the opener, a collaboration with local boy Levi Dexter on Lee Hazelwood's 'Snake Eyed Mama', while elsewhere The Atomics bring home Cochran's 'C'mon Everybody' and German newcomers Switchblade deliver their own 'Soul Of Denim' in the same powerful fashion. It's clear that while Hooker and company are united in their reverence for the early years of rock'n'roll, what we have here is an in-the-red sound and attitude that could barely have been conceived of pre-1977.

Scene regulars Roddy Radiation and Darrel Higham also get a look-in, before Hooker closes proceedings with a low down and dirty take on Hank Ballard's 'Cotton Pickin'.

Gerry Ranson