SPRING 2006 a women in music compendium

wears the trousers

the pipettes

star in our massive

band-o-rama

with the organ, the rogers sisters, devics & the chalets

plus...

kd lang
elin ruth
bic runga
neko case
terri walker
emm gryner
marissa nadler
Hello again!

Since you’ve been gone dear friends we’ve been ever so busy. Things got off to an auspicious start in January when we were invited to take part in a new national digital preservation scheme in conjunction with The British Library and The Women’s Library. Wears The Trousers was chosen as one of the first 150 sites selected to form the basis of a Women’s Issues collection. Of course we were only too happy to accept and you may have noticed the new logos on the website. Basically, what it means is that even if some horrible fate should befall the site as we know it, Wears The Trousers will still always be available until the end of Father Time himself, or something like that anyway.

Fear not, however, our heads didn’t swell enough to stop us from bringing you what is undoubtedly our best issue yet. You want indie icons? We give you Neko Case. You want the latest, greatest bands? We bring you five of ‘em. You want inspirational women? Read our interviews with Bic Runga, Emm Gryner and Terri Walker. There’s almost too much to mention so here’s my personal highlights of the last three months: (1) bonding with Bic over a mutual love of Border Collies; (2) the Neko Case cheese incident (see pages 22/23) and just generally loving her; (3) Eliza’s gorgeous Neko artwork; (4) managing to make it through The Organ interview without mentioning either the M word (Morrissey) or the S word (Smiths); (5) actually, just making it through The Organ interview at all was quite an achievement, as you’ll see for yourselves on page 10...

Best of all though has been the continuous and always appreciated support we’ve received from all over the world, not to mention all our new volunteers who’ve offered their much-valued help. You might notice this issue is quite a bit chunkier than before! Next issue: July.

Happy Easter!

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happy campers

The Chalets are a sassy Dublin five-piece whose sparky, original tunes have been setting indie club dancefloors on fire all over Britain and the Emerald Isle for the last twelve months or so, and they are now setting their sights on bringing continental Europe under their spell. Their debut album Check In, loosely conceptualised around 1950s glamorous air travel (think the Mile High Club and you’re on the right track), won them a nomination at the prestigious Meteor Awards, the annual Irish music industry do. They were also recently invited to play a free gig in Trafalgar Square as part of the Mayor’s St. Patrick’s Day festivities, where they really got the party started. Their sound is, in part, heavily reliant on Sixties girl group influences with all the call and response vocals and handclaps that entails, but also manages to sound cuttingly contemporary with their mix of electronic undertones, spiky guitars and angular riffs. Their stage show further reveals their endearing and humorous personalities, as frontwomen Pony and PeePee (real names Caoimhe and Paula) impress with swaying arms, yet more handclaps and exaggerated pouting expressions, all clad in vintage attire so fine that fellow thrift-store junkies go green-eyed and water profusely at the mouth. Oh, and there’s the slight matter of lots of filthy language! You see, nothing is half-baked with The Chalets, as Robbie de Santos discovered in a backstage chat with Paula at the Magnet Club in Berlin; they relish their touring commitments, give 110% every night, and you most certainly won’t hear them complaining about the drags of showbiz.

There’s no other business quite like it after all...

I think there are some really good female fronted indie-bands at the moment. Do you think they are showing the male-dominated NME indie crowd that women are equal to men? I’d like to think that’s a possibility, but I think, you know, what really sells in that whole “indie scene” is boys with nice haircuts and tight trousers and leather jackets. It’s always going to be popular. I mean, I’ve read “this year’s going to be the year for girl-fronted bands”, but it never seems to happen. I don’t know — I’d very much like that to happen, but we’ll see.

Your name was inspired by a crazy weekend at the All Tomorrow’s Parties festival. If you were curating your own weekend, what bands would you like to have?

I’d like to have The Shangri-Las, Le Tigre, Madonna... Madonna in the Eighties, not her now, Daft Punk, Weezer, Art Brut <laughs>... The Cribs!

Sound likes a great weekend. I’m sold!

Well I’d have fun!

You recently played a gig in Moscow and you are doing two big European support tours this Spring. How is your music being received outside Britain and Ireland?

Yeah, it’s really good. We’ve played Hamburg and Dresden, and then Munich last night. The European crowds are totally different. Sometimes in the UK, people think they’re a bit too “cool”, but in Europe they don’t care, it’s a lot more fun to play here. There’s so much energy!

The UK is really quite spoiled as far as live music goes. Do you think your sound would have evolved differently if you had made your album in London and had the ‘London band’ tag to your name?

Definitely. In Dublin there are no bands that sound like us at all. We stick out like a sore thumb. It’s all singer songwriters...

And boybands! You don’t have any brothers in boybands, do you?

Right, and boybands. But no, we don’t have any brothers in boybands <laughs>... there’s really nobody making music quite like ours in Dublin, but I like that.

You have certainly got a niche. Now, I notice Dylan seems to get badly treated in the band. Do you think he’s going to pull a Robbie Williams on you?

<laughs> He’s the drummer, he’s ginger! Of course we pick on him. But really, I think he’s more of a Geri Halliwell – he’s ginger. Seriously though, it probably would most likely be him that would have a solo career. We were all round his house once and we kept hearing this <makes assorted beeps and blips>... and I was like “What was that?” and it turns out it was his music.

A very avant-garde Geri Halliwell then?

Very.
You’ve been on the road for well over a year now. Is it still exciting getting on stage and playing the same songs?
I love it, I personally am not tired at all! I hate it when bands complain about not enjoying touring! I think if you choose to be in a band, then touring is part of that choice. And it’s great fun. You get to see a new town every day, hang out and get drunk with your best friends and then perform on stage every night! I’ve been to places I’ve never even dreamed of going before! It’s like a great big holiday. It’s still great fun and I’m looking forward to more touring this year!

Any other ambitions for 2006?
I actually really want to do a lot more touring in Europe. I’m really enjoying it here and it’s great to see more of the world. We get treated so much better here — we get these lovely dressing rooms and everyone is so helpful to us and we actually get what’s on our rider. In Britain we just get given six bottles of beers and a packet of crisps!

What exactly is on your rider?
Six bottles of beer and a packet of crisps! No, really, beer for the boys, cider for me and Caoimhe — we don’t drink beer — some nice wine, vodka… though we’ve had to stop getting vodka. Caoimhe gets problems!

One last question, have you thought about the second album yet?
Yes, our record company want us to put it out by the end of the year. But that’s not going to happen — it’ll probably be early next year. We’ve not got so much written for it just yet as we’ve been on the road for so long. We have a couple of songs and we always say we’ll try them out at soundcheck, but everyone just wants to get out of soundcheck as quick as possible, so it’s like <makes guitar noises for two seconds>… “OK, we’re done”… but we’re all really looking forward to making it.
three’s the magic number

After an amazingly successful year that saw self-declared New York trendies The Rogers Sisters at last reach out to non-US shores and be welcomed with a noisy adulation, Anja McCloskey went to meet the quirky sisters and their not-so-related bandmate to talk about electrocution, petty theft, Liverpudlian skinheads and their weird and wonderful new album, The Invisible Deck, named after an astonishing card trick that Mr Rogers Sr would perform for them as kids...

Since their inception in 2001 and subsequent self-release of their super-rare 7" Let’s Fly Away, sisters Jennifer (vocals, guitar) and Laura Rogers (drums, backing vocals) plus Hawaiian bassist/vocalist and honorary member of the Rogers clan, Miyuki Furtado (briefly a member of Baltimore indie rockers Gerty) have come an awful long way. It all started when self-confessed Detroit rock ‘n’ rollers Laura and Jennifer moved to New York and stumbled across Miyuki in a karaoke bar soon after the dissolution of their volatile feminist rock band Ruby Falls. His renditions of Purple Rain and Over The Rainbow were so heartbreakingly convincing that they decided on the spot that they couldn’t possibly let him go, instead towing him along to play a gig at a birthday party in Brooklyn the very next day.

From there, the trio became collectively named The Rogers Sisters and proceeded to play all of the trendiest house parties in New York’s fashionable Williamsburg neighbourhood. The band has never been one to take themselves too seriously though: “We wanted to ditch the ‘overthoughtoutedness’ of Nineties indie rock,” says Laura. “We wanted to let loose, have a good time and make a little soul.” They certainly seem to have hit a nerve with this concept; not only did they manage to build a mini-army of fans across Europe last year, they also took both the Reading and Leeds Carling Weekend Festivals by storm and instilled themselves as regular faces on MTV2.

What’s it like to live the hipster life of a Rogers Sister then? According to Jennifer, it must be pretty entertaining: “We get to travel to a lot of new places — we went to France and ate a million cheeses, we went to Australia and New Zealand and that was beyond our wildest dreams. We stole chocolate in Switzerland and got caught, we drank in the basement of some London bar and got in trouble...” But Miyuki quickly admits that it’s not all petty theft and sunshine: “We almost got beaten up by some skinheads in Liverpool — they were really disgusting!” he grimaces. “I also cut my hand open at Leeds festival and was bleeding all over my white clothes while an army of medics tried to put one single bandage on.”

In fact, Miyuki confesses that he always tries to horrify Laura and Jennifer during the band’s live performances by doing the most ridiculous things. Of course, there are times when his antics go gruesomely awry: “I cut my head open on a guitar one time and I fell into Laura’s drum set really badly another time,” he laughs. “One time we played, I fell off of the stage with my guitar right on top of a girl. It turned out she was an NME reporter... but in the end, pretty much any gig where I don’t get electrocuted is alright for me.”

“We just try to have fun and to the best of our ability recreate the chaos that used to occur at shows we played at home,” says Laura. “We used to play in dark slippery rooms full of drunken maniacs. Now that we get up on stage and there’s a light shining on you, you are so far away from the audience. So to get that kind of intensity is really challenging.” To the outsider, their live set comes across almost like a humorous B-culture approach to music. “We do a lot of private jokes during the set,” Jennifer admits. “I always try to make Laura laugh so that she messes up her songs!”

The Roger Sisters come from very different backgrounds. So while Jennifer and Laura were literally raised on rock ‘n’ roll — their father owns a record store and one-stop distribution outlet in Detroit and the girls grew up tagging along to shows by everyone from Journey and REO Speedwagon to Prince and The Cars — Miyuki on the other hand followed his diplomat father around the world and lived in Hawaii, Japan, Liberia and Switzerland before landing in Baltimore and then New York. “It’s funny how people can have such different experiences and still relate to each other,” says Jennifer. “It’s amazing that we still ended up liking The Zombies, The Cure, Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin.”

Taking into consideration their travelling past, it seems a little at odds that The Rogers Sisters are most often heard under the umbrella of “trendy New York bands”. But they don’t seem to mind: “We love being a trendy New York band. It’s good for us, there is a focus on the city we live in and we get to travel the world because of it,” says Laura, adding “The only thing I find frustrating is that people seem to think no one cares about us any more because we are from New York.”

To prove these ‘non-believers’ wrong the band are eagerly lining up a busy and energetic schedule for the year. “We want to hit the festivals again, it was so much fun last year. And we’ll tour as much as possible, in the UK, US, Japan, Greece, Brazil, Thailand, Ethiopia, Portugal, Hawaii...” says Jennifer, while Miyuki adds more secret plans: “We also want to be on Top of the Pops, duet with Robbie Williams and produce a song with Kanye West. But that might not happen...”
When Bella Union, the label founded by ex-Cocteau Twins Robin Guthrie and Simon Raymonde, held a showcase gig at Kilburn’s excellent Luminaire on a freezing Monday evening late in February, Wears The Trousers dispatched her trusty aides Pete Morrow and Clare Byrne to meet and greet Sara Lov and Dustin O’Halloran of Dévics (that’s dee-vix). Reduced to a two-piece on stage (“we lost them in a freak van fire”), Sara flirted from glockenspiel to piano to bass while Dustin marshalled an impressive collection of pedals, an FX unit and a sequencer. Simon Raymonde made a welcome appearance to give bass support for Lie To Me and Glenn Moule of Australian cabaret metal act Howling Bells provided mighty drums (not to mention a five-star, ten-gallon hat) on Red Morning and Secret Message To You. What impressed most though was the emotion, scale and texture of the songs, something that many production-heavy bands are incapable of creating in the live environment. That the Dévics could pick up and play tracks of such characteristic tone and depth was all the more striking given the minimal EP-sized duration of the set.

We managed to snag Sara and Dustin for a chat before the gig...

Congratulations on the new album, Push The Heart, we’ve been enjoying it a lot.
Sara: Thank you.

How did you find recording in LA compared with making your last album [2003’s The Stars At Saint Andrea] in Italy?
S: I know they’ve been saying that a lot but we actually did record a lot of it in Italy too. About half and half. We kind of bring our tapes back and forth. We did a lot of our own recording.

What prompted the move back to LA?
Dustin: For the last record, we did almost the whole thing in a farmhouse. It was our first time recording ourselves and Simon lent us a bunch of equipment, it was a sort of Frankenstein studio event. It was a good experience but we wanted to have more of a hand in the recording process, meaning mixing in LA.
S: Dustin hasn’t really moved back from Italy. I’m back and forth, more in LA.

Do you think that Italy and California influence your music differently?
S: I think wherever you are when you’re creating something has an effect. It’s not so much the culture that affects me, it’s more being away from the city, being isolated; those kind of things that affect the music more than being submersed in a different culture. To not be able to see your friends, your family, to not be able to see your friends’ bands in LA, that really affects the way you write. When you only have what you’re playing, what you’re listening to, it’s a different experience.

You’ve been a band for about a decade now. How do you think you’ve developed?
Dustin: It’s a weird question to answer because we’ve been in this band for so long and making this music that when I listen to our early stuff I feel like ‘oh my God, I was so young,’ everything was so different. We’ve just grown as people and everything’s changed, and our music is always changing and evolving — I think we’re always trying to do something new that might stimulate us that maybe we haven’t tried before. That doesn’t mean that we don’t revisit certain kinda things that we do.

Do you have any idea where you’re going to go from here?
Dustin: Every record we’ve ever done has been a complete blind journey, because we never have money... we never know how we’re going to be able to afford to record it <laughs>. Every time we’ve been writing or recording, our living circumstances change. Just for instance, for The Stars At Saint Andrea, we were both living in Italy and we had this place where we were writing the record. I’d be writing between the hours of 10 at night and 5 in the morning. And this record was different because I was writing a lot of music by myself, sending Sara tapes... she was working on stuff and then she came out here and we worked really hard for about 4 months, just on lyrics, and I set her up with a computer and she did it by herself.
S: Yeah, I recorded all my own vocals — a first for me — and I wrote as I recorded a lot of it and kind of experimented a little. That was pretty fun ‘cos nobody was around and I could try anything and not feel embarrassed and then if I did something bad I could erase it <laughs>. Always important.

Dustin: I think technology had more of a hand in helping us finish the songs. I think the idea to come back to LA was that I wanted to bring some of the tracks I had, maybe use loops or whatever, let someone really play it, and get a real feel... The last record was the first record we did more as a duo and I wanted to see how it would be writ-
ing as a duet and then bringing more of a band feel into it. So, it’s all an experiment really, just to see what comes next.

S: I think we’ve learned that, for us, it’s great to just take the resources we have and not have to spend money and just try to record ourselves. For our very early records we would do this huge production, get a studio and spend so much of our money. It’s very stressful because you know you just have this month and you have to do all of it. It’s like “I have to do these vocals in two hours, because this is so expensive being here” and to record it yourself at your leisure is a whole different world because there’s no stress.

Have you become a bit of a perfectionist?
S: Yeah, but I like to try to capture first takes. I like it to not be too processed.
D: I try to do that too. Maybe it’s a product of me playing piano but I like to try to capture a whole take from beginning to end, if I can. I love old records and that’s how they did it. To me, good musicianship is how records were made in the Sixties. They weren’t tuning people’s voices with computers.

Have you played many shows with the new material yet?
D: Not really, we just did four shows in LA just with this stuff.
S: But way before the record was done. We just did a little press tour, a promo in Italy, and now this one here and tonight we’re just playing as a duo, which is very different. Normally we play with five people and it’s a very full sound. It’s hard for us to play without all of that but we try to make it work. We’d like to bring the band, it’s just very expensive.

Are you touring properly later in the year?
D: We’re going to do some shows in Europe — Italy and Switzerland at the end of March. I don’t know if the UK is going to be a part of that right now. We might wait until a little bit later.

It’s so much more expensive in the UK than the rest of Europe!
D: It’s the first time we’ve been here and we spent about £150 in like a day!

On a bag of chips and a four-pack...
D: <laughs> Right. I mean, Italy has gotten a lot more expensive since the Euro but we’re used to spending in US dollars so it’s just whoooosh!

Presumably because you don’t fit into a convenient pigeonhole, you get compared to a vast and diverse list of other bands. We’ve got here from Mojave 3 to Leonard Cohen to early 70s Pink Floyd to Bertolt Brecht to Fiona Apple… one Amazon reviewer listed you as “cinematic torchcore and punk sea shanties”.

D: <laughs> I guess from a label or press standpoint that’s a bad thing, but I always think that’s good. There are two different types of music: timeless music and music that’s of the moment. Both of them are valid, because music that’s of the moment has spontaneity but, you know, it passes. I always wanted to be in the first category because that’s the music I love. Like Histoire De Melody Nelson by Serge Gainsbourg. That’s probably one of my top five.
S: Yeah, me too.
D: Not just sonically, but also musically — I think the arrangements on that record are amazing. And more in that vein really.

Who has really impressed you recently?
S: Deerhoof. And Eason.
D: Múm, I really really like.
S: I go through so much new music, it’s hard to name names because I know I’m going to forget a bunch of them.
D: I love a lot of classical music. I try to get some of the arrangements, the chordal voicing, that sort of thing, I like it when there’s an influence of that in the music. People like Serge Gainsbourg and Múm do that. And I think that does twist it a bit, because rock music can be formulaic and get a bit blocky. Jazz music can open things up, but there are also parameters within jazz. Classical gets even more open. I like that sense of space.

You can hear that in the music. Actually, the typewriter on Secret Message to You, made me think of Múm, playing around with toy instruments.
D: Yeah, where you’ve got a melody and twisting it a bit by not just working in root melodies and fifths, but then really bending it a little bit.
S: Also Sufjan Stevens and Laura Veirs and a lot of songwriters kinda people I like a lot. And actually this new My Latest Novel on Bella Union, that just came out.
D: Actually, some of the records that I really love are on Bella Union, which is totally coincidental.

Not paid to say that at all.
D: No no <laughs>… being totally objective, there are things that I like and things that I don’t. I was really pleased, the Explosions In The Sky record is beautiful and it’s nice to be a family.
S: I love The Arcade Fire. And the Bell Orchestre album.
D: The Arcade Fire have gotten loads of great press and there are so few cases when you can say that it’s truly deserved. I saw them at the Hollywood Bowl opening for David Byrne and I have to say it was one of the best shows I’ve seen for years. Seeing a band at a point when you know they’re arriving, and they’re such great musicians and they love what they do. It was beautiful to see and it was one of those things that kind of revitalises your faith in music. This is what it’s about, it’s about that moment when you get that exchange, it’s not about anything else.

Sufjan Stevens played a similar show to that here recently. He’s played a bunch of times over the past few years and nobody knew who he was, just in tiny places with a banjo, and then overnight everybody knows who he is and he plays these amazing shows with a full orchestra.
D: I think there are bands that do get to grow, if you get isolated. I mean, Sufjan Stevens is from New York, and maybe because nobody paid any attention to him for a while, it allows you to grow in a good way. Being from LA we see so many new bands that start off and their first show they’re already thinking there’s gonna be a record guy there and they haven’t even been a band for three months. At that point it’s like what is it really about, you know, is it about getting a record deal or about making music? And those bands, sometimes they last a year and then break-up.
S: Sometimes they get signed and break up right after that. Sometimes they’re signed and the label pressure makes them break up...
D: We didn’t move to LA to become a band like a lot of people do, we just grew up there. You have a certain arc of emotions where you’re working and you see a lot of other people doing all the things they want and that’s frustrating. But then you come full circle and you realise that the only thing that’s important is being by yourself or at the live show where it’s just the music. All of that other stuff is just temporary. It’s not gonna last for 90% of the people. You’ve just got to enjoy those moments.
The art of the phone interview is undereappreciated complex, or at least that's what Alan Pedder keeps telling himself after chatting with up and coming Canadian band The Organ recently. There are three simple rules, really. One, know who you're supposed to be talking to. Two, try to ease into a deeper conversation with some gentle/amusing small talk. Three, try to ask questions in an inventive manner without sounding like a complete and utter arse. There is a fourth, perhaps even more obvious axiom too — don't hang up on them mid-conversation! Just three minutes in and rules one and four are horribly destanarated. Questions prepared for cool-as-you-like lead singer Katie Sketch are rendered rather useless when a clerical whoopie means that she's been double-booked and guitarist Debra steps in to take her place, while the sheer newfangledness of a fresh-outta-the-box speakerphone ensures that the line goes dead not just once but embarrassingly twice. Jeremy Paxman, your job is safe!

Oh my god, I can't believe I just hung up on you. It's this bloody new phone. I think I've figured it out though, the trick is not to put it back on the cradle. Didn't see that one coming! <laughs sheepishly>... so, have you had much of a chance to watch the Winter Olympics?

Debra: Umm I've watched a little bit of it, not too much. A bit of the luge and a bit of the skiing.

Canada are doing quite well, aren't they?
D: They're doing alright. Better than you guys <laughs>.

What do you think the best Organ song to ice dance to would be?
D: Oh jeez, hmmm... <laughs> let me think about this for a second... I'd say it's more Time To Go - that's off our [Sinking Hearts] EP. That would be an alright song to do that to, but I'm kinda taking a wild guess there. That's a weird question.

Yeah, I'm sorry, there was gonna be a whole lead up introduction bit on skiing because I know Katie used to be quite a pro skier. [dammit rule two! you let me down]
D: Yeah she did.

Do you ski as well?
D: No I don't. I've only been cross country skiing twice in my life. A long time ago.

So, er, how are you enjoying the lovely British weather?
D: It's cold here, but I think it's actually about the same in Vancouver right now. What is it, one degree Celsius here?

Something like that, I actually haven't been outside yet today. It's probably raining. I think we get almost as much rain as Vancouver.

D: Actually I think you guys get more... well, usually you get more but we actually almost just broke a record. Just two days short of breaking the record for the most rain in Vancouver. We had pretty much two months straight of rain all day so it wasn't too nice.

Ick. Anyway, let's talk about your album Grab That Gun finally coming out over here. There must've been a lot of label interest, what made you go with Too Pure?
D: Well, I think it was perfect for us because it's kind of small and we didn't wanna go with anything big. We wanted to make sure we had control of what goes on with our album and stuff, and this way we mostly do. Actually there wasn't really too much competition, but we got offered this and we thought 'oh, this'll be perfect'

Are you guys fans of any of the other Too Pure acts?
D: I know Katie is. Actually, she's just sitting across from me and she just finished her interview. We can actually kind of... can you hold on a second? <barely audible> hey, I'm talking to the man from Wears The Trousers. He wants to know if you're a fan of any of the other acts on our label...

Katie: <muffled laugh> Electrelane!
D: Katie loves Electrelane... <laughs> I haven't actually listened to too many of the other bands on the label yet. I've been to some of their shows and they were pretty fun to watch.

Your shows are doing pretty well too. I mean, you're getting pretty great press. How are you finding the London chin strokers?
D: The London audiences have been pretty good. They've been kind of smaller than we're used to because our record hasn't been released here yet [it has now! go buy it]. It's kind of like Vancouver. They're not too enthusiastic... well, the people who have the record are really into it, but the ones that don't are just kind of seeing what we're all about.

As a band you're quite modest about your musicianship. Do you think that maybe your British fans better appreciate that. I mean, as a nation, we're not very good at puffing out our chests and looking fame in the eye.
D: I think the British audiences are actually pretty similar to the Canadian ones in a lot of ways.

What about the US?
D: We actually don't have very many fans in the US. Our record hasn't been released there either and we've only been there a couple of times.

Oh! Are Too Pure going to be releasing it over there too?
D: No, they're not

OK, well, in Canada at least, Grab That Gun's been out for a couple of years now. Do you ever get on stage and think 'oh crap, I'm not playing that bloody song again!' or do they still get you fired up?
D: <laughs> We definitely do! We've been writing some new songs lately and we're really excited to replace some of the others because we've been playing them for so long. But we have to make sure we play certain songs so that everyone will be happy.
And how’s it working out with your new bassist, Katie’s sister?
D: It’s good, she’s really enthusiastic. She can write and she can play well and we get along with her well.

Is Shmoo her real name?
D: Yeah, pretty much. She’s been called that since birth and she prefers it.

So, recording the album was apparently a bit of a nightmare. What was the hardest song to nail?
D: We actually had to redo the whole album, it wasn’t just one particular song that we weren’t happy with. The first producer [Kurt Dahle of The New Pornographers] had a different vision of what we should sound like than we’d originally planned. He made it sound a bit too crisp and clean and not like a real band, and when we heard the end product we realised we had to redo pretty much everything. Now they all sound like they should sound, to me. Basically, our goal of redoing it was to make it sound like our live show and not too overproduced.

Do you think that the recording of the next album will be easier?
D: I hope so. It has been so far. We started recording a couple of the new songs already so it’s going pretty well.

Great! When do you think it might be ready?
D: We’re kind of recording as we go along and we’re touring a lot as well, so I’m guessing probably not until next fall.

Something to look forward to! Are you working with any producers we might know?
D: John Collins. He plays in The New Pornographers, he’s been recording us.

Grab That Gun is fantastically moody. Is it hard for you to write happy songs without them turning out all Disney and vomitous?
D: Yeah, those are the kind of songs that we usually end up scrapping. We start usually by writing the music first, and sometimes if it turns out too happy or if Katie feels like she can’t sing it as she would like then it won’t work out.

Well, yeah, you’ve got to believe in what you’re singing.
D: Yeah, absolutely.

Lyrically, I think the songs on Grab That Gun have a great economy to them. Like nothing, not a word is wasted. One thing’s puzzling me though — in Memorize The City, the line “Acrisius favours” was that the name of the boat in the song? [huh? what possessed me? it’s my Martha’s Foolish Ginger moment!]
D: I can’t answer that question, I didn’t write the lyrics. Um, I’m wondering, do you me to... Katie’s not on the phone yet, do you want me to put her on?

Umm, yeah, sure, if you want. Only if she doesn’t mind!
D: Hold on a second... <barely audible> he has a really weird question <assorted muffled sounds>
K: Hello! It’s Katie
Hi! <repeats question>
K: The name of the boat?
Yeah, there’s kind of a boat lyric and then this name pops out.
K: Ohh, I see! <laughs>... I have a hard time explaining the lyrics, but it’s definitely not in reference to the boat. Have you ever typed Acrisius into Google before?
Yeah, I tried that. Acrisius was a vengeful Greek god who was accidentally killed by a discus thrown by his grandson Perseus...
K: Yeah, that’s right, it’s more of a gods and mythology reference.
<laughs> OK, now I feel dumb!
K: Oh no problem. Do you have any other lyric questions you want to ask?
No, that was the only one <laughs>... cheers!
K: <laughs> Thanks, bye!

Hi Deb. Sorry about that!
D: No, it’s quite alright.

So whose idea was it to have that cute little organ solo tucked away at the end of the album?
D: I think that was Katie’s idea. Katie and Jenny were kind of fooling around on the organ while they were recording it and that little vignette at the end is just them messing around. It’s kind of neat though.

Is it a pain carting the organ around on tour with you?
D: Umm well we’ve only been able to take it on tour with us in Canada and the States so far. We can’t take it on the airplane. It’s really heavy, so we try and get as many people to help us carry it as we possibly can.

<laughs> How much does it weigh?
D: Errr... well, it weighed a couple hundred pounds or something but then we recently, er, revised it a little bit. We got a friend of ours to cut the bottom half off and tuck the wires inside so not it’s not quite as big. It’s a little bit lighter. That’s been kind of, um, interesting. But yeah, when we tour Europe and the UK we’ve been bringing a friends’ keyboard with which we made a sample of our Hammond. It doesn’t sound quite as good but that’s all we can do for now.

Yeah, I always wondered how Tori Amos manages to drag all her pianos around.
D: <laughs> Yeah, I don’t know about that either. It’s really expensive too.

I bet! OK, so I read that your red guitar Bryan was given to the band by the actual Mr Adams. What’s he like?
D: Actually, I haven’t met him. Katie worked with him once.

I was just wondering what he was like because he gets so much crap from the press over here. Speaking of press, did you hear that the Kaiser Chiefs called you their new favourite band in one of our newspapers?
D: We did hear something about that actually, that was nice of them.
Who've you enjoyed touring with most?
D: Umm, well, most of the bands we've played with are usually really nice and friendly. We toured with The New Pornographers, they were fun to hang out with. Neko Case is really awesome... and a band called Controller.Controller... have you heard of them?

In brief, yeah, only the other day actually.
D: Well, we toured with them and they're really nice people so we have a lot of fun with them.

I'll look out for them, cheers! OK, so most of the people I know found you first through your appearance on The I. Word, and I think. It's a real American phenomenon, this breaking of indie bands through TV shows. What do you make of it?
D: I think it's a really good way to be seen!

Any show you're dying to be played on? Any favourites?
D: Umm, let's see... probably any television show that isn't completely ridiculous! <laughs> I think that would be a start. I don't get to watch much TV really, and I don't have cable either so I pretty much just have two channels. I don't have much of an option.

<slightly panicked> You know what, I've just realised I haven't got any more general questions prepared... I wrote them all with Katie in mind, so umm... well I guess that doesn't matter!
D: Umm, well she's still free if you wanted to ask her.

OK, thank you Deb. Nice talking to you!
D: You too. Hold on one second...
K: Hellooo! <laughs>

Hello again! Sorry about this, there was a complete mix-up and I've ridiculously run out of general questions... do you mind if I ask you some more personal ones?
K: No, go right ahead.

Great... er, so you worked at Bryan Adams' studios. What's he like?
K: On a personal level, I don't really know him all that well. I worked for him when he was making one of his records so I was around him quite a lot, and to be honest he was always really nice to me but he's also purely focused on the task at hand. That's really my take on him. He's like the hardest working person I've ever witnessed in my life. Always the first person in the studio and the last one to leave. I think he must sleep like four hours a night. Insanely dedicated. He's the kind of guy who'll be working on a guitar part and changing a light bulb at the same time, you know <laughs>... he's extremely focused, always.

Neat! OK, I read you've got a psychology degree...
K: I'm actually four classes short of one. That's what I was working towards until last year when I just couldn't do school any more because all the touring got so busy. I was doing school and touring at the same time for a while but it was starting to get to the point where it was just impossible.

Do you think you'll ever go back to it?
K: <pauses> Yeah, I do actually. I mean at some point the music thing's going to either end or take a break so I will definitely go and get the rest of those courses then. It's really frustrating to not be able to finish your degree. It makes me feel like a dropout <laughs>.

Well, I know you're sick of being asked about the whole 'being in an all-girl band thing' so I thought it might be fun to ask you about it in an interesting, psychology-related way... I don't know if you ever got round to studying Jungian theory... [c'mon rule three!]
K: Let's see if I can remember anything!

<laughs> I'm totally rusty too, but one of his theories was that achieving a certain balance of anima and animus has an influence on a person's creative ability. So I was wondering, as an all-female band, whether you think that your music is more influenced by your animus?
K: Oh god, I don't even remember what that is. Do you know enough about to explain it to me?

If I remember correctly, Jungians think that every person has their semi- or unconscious female and male traits that guide them. The animus is feminine and the anima is masculine. They think it's the reason people can fall for someone in an instant, like they see their anima/animus in that person, but that's not really what I was getting at.
K: I don't think we studied that yet. That doesn't ring any bells at all. Seriously.

OK, no worries. I just thought I'd try and get round that whole boring "is it different for a girl band" kind of question. Trying to be too clever! That'll teach me <laughs>.
K: Oh no, I'd answer the question if I had, like, any brain. We just flew in yesterday so I'm a bit jetlagged. Actually, that's not even my excuse; my excuse is I can't remember a thing about school already and it's only been a year! <laughs>

I can't remember anything about my degree either so you're not alone! OK, moving swiftly on, you've been doing some fashion shoots with designer Marc Jacobs. Was that a weird experience?
K: Yeah, it was, but it was really quick and I was really jetlagged and exhausted and it all kind of happened within about three hours. I've done a lot of photo shoots before so the actual photo shooting part wasn't weird. The weird part was wearing the outfits. I don't usually wear anything other than jeans so that felt a bit strange. And being around proper models was a bit strange as well, because I've never really been around them before so I didn't know anything about it. But, on the whole, it was like sit on the couch, eat a meal, do a couple of photos in about five different outfits and then I was out the door, so it was really quick.

A meal? You mean models eat!?
K: <laughs> Sometimes, yeah. I guess.

And did you get to keep any of the clothes like a proper celebrity?
K: No, but they sent a catalogue and asked me if I wanted to choose anything but I just hadn't had time, basically!

OK, time for one last question... you've got a tattoo of a heart on your arm with a blank banner running across it. Is it reserved for the name of 'The One' or for that elusive perfect chord progression? Will you ever fill it in?
K: Umm, I don't think I'll ever fill it in, no <laughs>... I'm old enough now to realise I don't think it'll ever be filled. I think if I'd had it when I was 17 it would have been filled around 8000 times by now, but that's part of the reason why I'll never fill it in, because I realise that things change... don't they?

They definitely do. Listen, thanks so much.
K: You're very welcome! Byeee!
So, Rose, if you saw Madonna walking down the street tomorrow wearing some polka dot designer ensemble, would you go and confront her and say “Oi pop magpie, you’ve nicked our idea?”

<laughs> Yeah, but it’s a bit late for that. Polka dots are in all the shops now so we’ve got girls turning up to our gigs wearing nicer dresses than us and that’s not on! So I think we might have to have a bit of a rethink at some point. It is something we’ve been doing for a couple of years now so, yeah, we could say we started the whole polka dot revival! At first it was just something that people could instantly associate with us. It’s nice for us to have matching outfits. It’s as if in that moment we put our dresses on, we become The Pipettes, kind of like a gang.

Like the Pink Ladies but with polka dots! Yeah, that sort of thing. It’s our uniform!

What’s next then, stripes?
No... I think you run the risk of that kind of very defined image becoming tired and we don’t want to be seen as a kind of novelty band? We really care about our songs and our writing and we know there’s a lifespan to everything. We don’t want to get bored with ourselves either!

I like the way you’re basically saying don’t put too much stock in so-called ‘integrity’ and saying that anyone can have a go at making music. Is it the ultimate everywoman pastime?
I think that’s something we definitely believe in. One of the things we hate about musicians is this sort of mystification and “oh my god, they’re amazing genius” attitude. I think a lot of musicians play up to that, especially male guitar bands. They’ll promote that idea themselves and it’s really false and boring. It doesn’t make for anything new or exciting to come through. And I think the most interesting things that I’ve listened to have come from our guitarist’s night in Brighton called Totally Bored. It’s once a month at some café and he gets all kinds of people turning up to play their little songs. And it might not be the most technically brilliant thing but something that has, you know, a bit of heart about it and a bit of risk taking as well. I think that’s maybe what’s really missing from the current music scene.

I think we’ve seen a bit of a resurgence of that kind of thing in recent years, especially in New York with the whole antifolk scene. Yeah, I think that’s a classic example of what we’re interested in. It doesn’t even have to be something new, just having a different way of saying things is great. People who aren’t classically trained or whatever are going to more easily access than someone whose brain is crowded by all of the so-called rules that they might know. In a way, that’s a different thing to us, because we’re coming at it from a traditional entertainment angle.

How do you think The Pipettes would go down in New York?
Oh god, I can’t really imagine what they’d say. I bet they’d think it was ever so quaint or something.

How do you respond to naysayers who think that having such a firm emphasis on fun means you’ll lack longevity?
Hm, I don’t know. I think that’s something that people are immediately going to confront us with, but that’s only looking slightly on the surface of what we’re doing. We want to make really great records for people to dance to and have a great time. We want to have that instantaneous effect but we’re really interested in everything to do with songcraft and the way that things are structured and work quite hard on those elements. We’re certainly not flippany about the music that we’re making so I hope that comes across as well. There’s always going to be people who look at us and say, you know, “there’s three girls having a laugh on stage, it doesn’t mean anything” and that’s fine, that’s cool, but we’re quite serious really!

Given the revival of the Sixties girl group sound in indie music with The Long Blondes, Raveonettes, Chalets etc., would you be surprised to see Simon Cowell wade in with a manufactured replica?
Maybe. We don’t necessarily want to be marginalised to the indie market. I think people kind of assume that because we’re a live band that that’s where we’re coming from, but the indie circuit is just something you have to do when you’re a live band. I think our aspirations go more towards TV shows like CD:UK and Top Of The Pops than the NME. I would be really happy to see Simon Cowell create some big band, if only for us to piss all over it and show...
them how to do it properly! <laughs>...we’d like to stand up against bands like Girls Aloud and Sugababes and that kind of thing.

Do you make a distinction between the Sixties girl group sound and the girl group ethos, which was all about the svengali super-producers? Are you careful to distance yourselves from the idea of some sort of managed post-modern attempt at pastiche?

I suppose so. I mean, you can never really control what people are going to think and I think that’s a very risky business. We’re very much aware of all those issues but the difference between us and bands that came from that era is that we sort of wanted to manufacture ourselves in a way, before anybody else got the chance to. From the very beginning, we had these ideas and we’re all very much in control of these things. We don’t do anything by mistake really. It’s all carefully thought through and all seven of us are involved in that. There’s no real leader of the band as such. There’s no main songwriter either. We all write songs and us three girls are in control of what we’re doing on stage. But we can’t escape certain misconceptions, and in a way we kind of like people to be a bit confused by what it is we’re doing. A lot of people seem to go “oh I see where you’re coming from, you must be a post-feminist” and we’re like well maybe we’re not and maybe it doesn’t have to be like that. There’s other things.

People like a bit of mystery, don’t they?
Yeah. Well, no not really, it makes them a bit angry sometimes I’ve found! <laughs>

Really?
They’re like “surely you must be able to put your name to some kind of cause”... so, yeah, I don’t know.

A lot of the songs of the girl group era were pretty much just glossed up morality tales. Is that something that you try to bear in mind lyrically?
Hmm, no not really. I think that our songs are really just about the way we feel. It doesn’t have to be like that. There’s no main songwriter either. There’s no real leader of the band as such. People like a bit of mystery, don’t they?

They’re coming from a more modern place are they?
Definitely. I really do feel that. It is still very much a male-dominated world and unfortunately not much has changed really. Boys tend to be taken a lot more seriously than girls, and especially girls like us who are sort of playing around with feminism. I mean, people are so quick to judge us in a way that they would never judge a man. But we know that and it doesn’t frighten us but sometimes it’s still a bit difficult.

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Before you got signed, is it true that a lot of labels said they didn’t really know how to market you? What makes Memphis Industries different do you think?
Yeah, it’s true. I think their attitude is different. They have this ethos that each act they manage they want to be different to the last. They’re quite a new label and I think they really enjoy taking risks. Obviously as with any label they want to make money but I don’t think that’s the key thing. They took a bit of a gamble with us. I mean, they really liked us but they weren’t really sure where we were going to fit, but that didn’t necessarily matter. That’s what’s really great, that they’ll say “let’s just give it a go”. So yeah, I don’t really know what they were thinking! <laughs>

In the girlgroup era, labels were often described as a sort of family, is that how you see your set-up?
Sort of. Yeah. We try to get on with everyone we work with and there’s definitely a sort of “oh you’re a Memphis band” kind of attitude. But we don’t really get to see people that often with everyone jetting off to places, doing their own thing, so in that sense of family, maybe not.

So before you recorded your first album recently, you hadn’t spent much time in the studio, more on the stage. How’d it go?
It was great. It was such a lovely chance to finally get some of these songs down. I mean, some of them we’ve been playing for over two years now, so we were really quite ready to have them properly recorded. Especially with a proper concentrated amount of time. Although, actually it turns out we did it in about two weeks, which is really quick. But we finally had the opportunity to work with the string quartets and horn trios that we’ve been carrying around in our heads from the beginning. And it’s actually been realised now, which is really exciting. In our eyes, it’s definitely the record that we wanted to make, which is quite an achievement I think! <laughs> Not to blow our own trumpet or anything but you hear a lot of people moaning about how they didn’t want things this way or that way and we felt like that about our previous recordings. I think we actually did get across what we wanted to, but it is definitely a leap for us, with proper blood, sweat and tears put into it. So we’re really excited to see what people make of it because I think that perhaps it’s not the record that people expected us to make, so we’ll see.

OK, last question, as there’s seven of you, The Pipettes have a melting pot of influences and I hear you’re a bit of a folkie at heart... can we expect some kind of ceilidh dance video in the future?
<laughs> No I don’t think so, probably not. I mean, you never know, but I think that’s my main kind of influence but I don’t think the others would share in it. It’s not really a part of the current Pipettes oeuvre. It would be much to the horror of Riot Becki I imagine!!
Once upon a time there was a magical place full of the promise of good things. A utopian land where all men (and women) were equal, from common workaday Joe's or Joanne's to aging heroes from long, long ago. It was a wonderful paradise called mp3.com.

These days mp3.com is little more than yet another online CD/download store with no indication of its groundbreaking past. The idea was quite simple; have a website where anyone – yes anyone – could post their latest compositions, EPs or even full albums in mp3 format. If you browsed past an album that you happened to like, then mp3.com, for a small fee, would even burn it onto CD, print up the album cover and mail it to you.

The site was certainly egalitarian and open to all. Bedroom musicians had the same access as established artists who used it for those private “experimental” projects in which no label would take an interest. Byrds founder Roger McGuinn used it as a base for his Folk Den project, compiling and distributing his own recordings of traditional American folk songs. David Bowie also delved into his vaults of rare, unreleased tracks and posted them on the site. Of course, for every McGuinn or Bowie using mp3.com there were a thousand others posting material of, at best, questionable quality. After all, even this Eden sprouted the odd apple tree while snakes slithered in the long grass.

Derek Sivers, founder of CDBaby, recently put his finger on the issue – there were no filters, no way of practically separating the musical wheat from the talentless chaff. “I think filters are needed right now in the music scene because distribution has become so easy. mp3.com was even more extreme example of that – anybody could just fart into a mic and upload it. It was free. It’s just an mp3, you don’t even have to burn a CD… all of a sudden there were just hundreds of thousands of mp3s up there – how could you possibly go through that?”

Rather more diplomatically, an MTV employee was quoted at an online content delivery conference as saying, “If nothing else, mp3.com showed us there are an almost unlimited number of marginally talented people out there.”

Ten years ago the technology available to marketplace sites like mp3.com was insufficient to provide meaningful filtering for users. Users chose from a range of simple genres to classify their pages and the automated user assistance was rudimentary. Sivers again, “…to their credit [they] really did try to set up a system where the cream would rise to the top – they did it in terms of popularity of downloads and such… [they were] popularity contests as far as the people who already had the biggest fanbase, or if you worked at a big company, you email everybody in the company and say, please go download my song so I can rise to the top of the charts.”

Of course it couldn’t last and at the turn of the millennium the launch of a basic file-sharing facility on the site led to damaging court action by the recording industry establishment against mp3.com. The dot-com bust that followed soon after sealed its fate.

Fast forward five years to an online world which has changed immeasurably. Technical advances and the indomitable spread of broadband has revolutionised how we use the internet and view music. Now we have innumerable online music stores, burgeoning legal download sites, the Napster debacle seems to be over bar the shouting, digital stations are multiplying at an hourly rate and claiming to know what music we like better than we do. Even those shiny, rainbow-hued optical discs are touted as being as obsolete as a wax cylinder or a Betamax tape. Most of this could have been predicted by those futurologists with their hover cars and Bacofoil jumpsuits. However, no one could have reasonably foreseen the explosive success of a site that has grown from a few hundred users to over 70 million in only three years – and its effect on grassroots musicians and music fans. Without a doubt, MySpace will go down in the internet annals as a true phenomenon.

**Will you be my friend?**

For the uninitiated, MySpace is what’s officially known as a ‘social networking site’. It’s operation (on the surface) is simple – upon registering as a MySpace member one receives what is, effectively, a web page that serves as your MySpace home – initially with a standard but user-friendly format, customisable through simple HTML programming (‘standard’ and off the shelf elements/editors are already becoming readily available). Its two beauties and the keys to its success are its breadth of features and the fact that, for the user, it operates on an incredibly organic basis,
exploiting the powerful six degrees of separation principle. Users network by finding pages of users who share common interests and inviting those people to become their ‘friend’. A list of each user’s ‘friends’ is displayed on their page allowing you to browse your new friend’s other chums to see if they are someone you want to get to know too – after all any friend of yours must be a friend of mine. In effect, the MySpace experience is the online realisation of real-life social interaction.

Whilst this, on its own would be unlikely to keep up interest for long, MySpace’s interactive features allows a sense of community to blossom. From each page there is the facility to e-mail and instant message friends, display photos, coordinate diaries, post bulletins, leave comments on other friends’ pages, join special interest groups and online forums and blog your wisdom to the world; all in all, there’s enough to keep most users occupied, and enough to make meaningful connections possible. It now even incorporates features similar to those on sites such as Friends Reunited and Friendster.

As with so many innovations, all this was the result of a few individuals’ inspiration – in this case Tom Anderson (everyone’s first ever friend on joining MySpace) and Chris DeWolfe. Whilst working for an online storage group Anderson came up with the idea of a cyber-networking site, pitched it to DeWolfe who arranged investment from Intermix and the rest was, very soon, history!

Whilst large numbers of MySpace users may be hormone-fuelled teens looking to score, a more discerning clientele has quickly amassed. Music has been a strong focus of MySpace since its genesis and has increasingly become a powerful marketing tool for both major and independent recording and performing artists. DeWolfe was strongly connected to people in the LA creative community and polled bands, artists, musicians and other creatives for feedback on what they would want out of a promotional and networking site. Those features were quickly incorporated into MySpace. Since 2004, musicians have been able to create their own music profiles that allow them to promote their concerts and other events and post up to four mp3 files that can be set to automatically stream whenever the profile is viewed. Musicians even have the option to let their friends and fans download, rate and comment on their latest tracks.

It didn’t take the major record labels long to cotton on to the potential power of MySpace as a promotional tool. International megastars such as REM, the Rolling Stones, U2, Madonna, Kelly Clarkson, Coldplay and Mariah Carey all have their own pages, often with tens of thousands of friends. Other established but less mainstream artists like Aimee Mann, Ani DiFranco and PJ Harvey have also joined in the fun. Emerging talent like KT Tunstall are using it too – Tunstall’s MySpace presence formed a solid word-of-mouth basis for February’s US launch of Eye To The Telescope.

Sisters doin’ it for themselves
No matter how much the majors look to promote their product through MySpace, it’s in the realm of the independent artist that the site has begun to have the greatest impact. The rise of the Arctic Monkeys, a veritable internet phenomenon, has been attributed to their MySpace presence and has already become the stuff of legend. Indeed, they now reside in the top ten most popular bands on MySpace in terms of friends and page views (nearly 50,000 friends and three quarters of a million page views) out of well over 350,000 music pages. However, even at a more modest level, the site gives independent artists a shop window in which to display their wares, interact with fans, publicise their gigs and recordings and increase their profile. Whether completely new artists using MySpace as an alternative to a ‘proper’ website or more established artists working the circuit, the response was uniformly positive and remarkably similar.

LA-based independent artist Kat Parsons jumps in at this point, “It’s been a really wonderful way to introduce people to my music and it makes it really easy to record something, convert it to an mp3 and get new music out there right away. It’s also a really neat way to get to know my fans and to tell them more about me.”

Brianna Lane who plies her trade around the American midwest and further afield agrees: “The internet is a godsend for independent artists. Without the big bucks of a major label backing us it’s challenging to get your name out there. As a promotional tool it’s essential… word of mouth (or word of e-mail!) travels fast and there are hundreds of networking sites and fan outreach opportunities. It’s great seeing folks at my shows that I know from MySpace… they’ll come up to me afterwards and say ‘Hey, I’m your MySpace friend...’ and often I’ll think ‘No way! Man, it’s working.’ I’m always stunned and grateful when I find out I’ve made an impression on someone through the internet and they’ve gone beyond that and made their presence known at a live show.”

Another artist making good use of MySpace technology is Wisconsin’s ukulele-totin’ pop princess, Victoria Vox, who seems to spend most of the year heading up or down both the US highway system and the information superhighway, spreading the news. “I get on MySpace daily… well, I try to! Its proved to be as addictive as coffee. I feel it’s sort of replaced the website for
emerging artists and DIY-ers. It is, in fact, a one page website...and a free one at that! I can’t mention that word ‘free’ enough. There are so many outlets for musicians to promote at no cost but the coolest thing about MySpace is that it’s primarily a ‘fan site’. The interaction between fans and musicians is great – and fans love it.”

For the hard working muso trying to make it on a budget there are other benefits of MySpace too. Vox again, “It’s also a great way to meet other bands and swap gigs and audiences. Overall, I think it’s been positive all round.” Lane is similarly enthusiastic but adds a word of scepticism, “For gig attendance... it’s definitely helped out there... connecting with some really awesome and helpful folks that want to get people out to see my shows. They are so amazing and such huge supporters of independent music. Getting gigs? I think it’s helped too. A lot of venues have MySpace sites so it makes it easy to be in touch with one another – helping to build a stronger community. But MySpace still seems to be a little too new to be fully trusted. My guess is that bookers like listening to CDBaby or SonicBids...just a theory!”

Filthy lucre?
All that being said, keeping a sprawling organism like MySpace running can’t be an easy prospect as it continues to grow in scope and popularity. From a few thousand users at the end of 2003, it now boasts around 70 million members, of whom over 32 million are regularly active with daily traffic rates rivalling web monopolies Google and Yahoo. This type of market penetration doesn’t go unnoticed. Inevitably, hungry eyes were closely watching the site’s meteoric rise and in July 2005 ripples of concern went through the online community when the parent company of MySpace was bought by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp for $580 million (£330 million). However, the conspiracy theory concerns of control and corporate strangulation have yet to come to pass. Subscribing to the ‘if it ain’t broke’ school of thought, MySpace carries on much as ever, with occasional tweaks and upgrades.

Murdoch, or his minions at least, do have plans for expansion and maybe even world domination. There are already around a million MySpace users based in the UK and in January, News Corp announced its intention to introduce a UK-based MySpace domain. Interestingly, but not entirely surprisingly, the initial focus for the site would be the UK’s music scene. Plans were already afoot to cooperate with the producers of the British TV chart music show, CD: UK (recently exported Stateside as CD: USA – catchy name, would never have thought of that!) incorporating unsigned MySpace bands into the format. Fox Interactive Media president Ross Levinson said, “We hope to go back to the UK to tap into how successful that show is. Hopefully they’ll want to market through MySpace and we’ll tap into the local events scene, parties, clubs, artists, film makers, television producers, so I think it’s going to grow pretty rapidly.”

Brave words and a great opportunity for the cream of the UK’s unsigned and independent artists, but it remains to be seen whether the ‘independent’ artists who end up being featured qualify for that title only technically. MySpace’s ‘independent’ artists do feature, after all, the likes of Nickelback, Jem, Evanscence and LL Cool J. Maybe it will be corporate strangulation and conspiracy theory after all.

Try some, buy some
But why all the fuss over MySpace? What about the alternatives for searching out great new music. The industry is making a lot of noise about so-called ‘recommendation engine’ technologies such as Pandora, Moodlogic, Musicbrainz, Mercora or Grouper that learn about their users’ musical tastes and suggest other artists and tracks that might appeal. All this works well in theory. Indeed, Yahoo’s LaunchCast online music station has worked well on this principle for some time – allowing users to rate their favourite music and suggesting occasional new or unrated selections. All very good but it does have weaknesses in that it takes no account of the mercurial nature of musical taste, the contradictions within any music collection or the nature of fandom itself. Personally, I have always loved Aimee Mann but have never got on with Ani DiFranco or Polly Harvey’s music. I adore Sarah McLachlan but don’t connect emotionally with Tori Amos. Recommendation engines say that I should. However, it does amuse me that my eclectic tastes might lead to a few Deep Purple and Thin Lizzy fans being exposed to the occasional random Chic, ELO or June Tabor track.

It seems that, somehow, MySpace and its networking technology connects with us on an organic and human level. It allows us to happen across wonderful new ‘finds’, peruse the virtual musical tastes of other music fans and to interact with them in a real way. Aside from the potential for commercial manipulation of the site, there is also a danger of the close accessibility eroding the traditional mythology of the artist. However, the site gives singers, songwriters and bands the chance to reach out to new fans who would never have come across their music otherwise.

Perhaps the last words should go to one of those artists, Kat Parsons: “The world is full of connections – six degrees of separation – and MySpace is great at connecting people even further, both socially and musically. It’s neat that I can reach someone with whom I share common musical tastes. I think you can have true connection with someone through a song. MySpace allows for that. It allows two strangers to find one another – artist and fan – and to connect through a song. And if a stranger likes a tune they can easily learn more and let other people know about it. Other forms of getting your music out there are not as effective – a flyer or poster doesn’t play a song! Maybe the main disadvantage is that there is so much out there and so little time!”

Got a MySpace profile? Come and befriend us! We’re the new Arctic Monkeys...
to the vixen go the spoils

Illustration by Eliza Lazy

The archetype of the fox as a totem of cunning and ingenuity goes at least as far back as Biblical times, and recurs again and again in almost every genre of story. In romance, the term can apply to either a beautiful woman or a distinguished older man; in adventure, the hunted or tenacious, artful hunter; in fairytales, a cheating despot or lovable rule-flouting rogue. Few other characters tread so finely down the line that marks out good from bad. But where a fox makes its path, does deceit necessarily follow, however well intentioned? With her new album Fox Confessor Brings The Flood being heralded in all quarters as a modern marvel of noirish storytelling and a distillation of her already formidable talent, Neko Case may know the answer. Alan Pedder meets her over lunch (salad, soup and fruit for you fact fans) on a freezing afternoon...

“The Fox Confessor is not the trickster,” Neko is quick to assert. “He’s an observer, he sees everything but he’s very elusive. You can ask him questions if you happen to chance upon him, but the likelihood he’ll give you a straight answer is slim.” Sounds like a politician, I venture and receive a wry smile. “He’s kind of like the demon go-between between Faust and the devil. When Faust makes the deal with the devil to be all-powerful, Satan sends his minion in to give him what he wants and Faust says to the demon, ‘ok, I’m the king of this now but I wanna know what life means, I wanna know what love means.’ And the demon gets kinda irritated and says, ‘I would tell you that but your human brain is so tiny you couldn’t possibly contain it,’ so that’s kind of what he is. But then he’s also half, you won’t understand the meaning unless you have the experience. Sure I could tell you but you’re not going to get it.’

Does a similar principle apply to her lyrics? Like many artists, Neko is wary of people attributing every song to a direct personal experience, even when those same songs are so convincingly detailed. “I’m kinda hesitant to print the lyrics,” she says. “It makes it easier for the listener to make the songs their own, to insert their own life experiences into them if they want to. There’s room for a little ambiguity.” Still, the temptation to overanalyse Neko’s songs is certainly a strong one, and even more so when faced with Fox Confessor’s extraordinary wealth of literary, surrealist and sometimes absurd source material. Dirty Knife, for instance, is a streamlined version of an old family tale passed down to Neko from her grandmother. Almost Roald Dahl-esque in its fantastical vision of real-life events in which members of a household contract lead poisoning, go “completely bonkers” and burn all their furniture. “I narrowed it down to one person in the story because I tried to write it about all of them but it wasn’t concise enough for me,” she explains. “I try to keep things not too involved, so the story became not so much about the people but what was happening.” She pauses for a sip of water before adding a characteristically self-deprecating disclaimer, “It was easier, I’m lazy.”

Of course, laziness is by far the least of Neko’s traits; it may have been three and a bit years since her last studio album, Blacklisted, but she’s since done countless tours, appeared on two critically-worshipped albums by her side-line earner The New Pornographers, lovingly crafted the concept live disc The Tigers Have Spoken and topped a number of surveys, including a Playboy web poll for Sexiest Babe of Indie Rock in April 2003. In February, she was voted Female Artist of the Year at the 2006 PLUG Independent Music Awards without even releasing an album (Tigers was released in October 2004). Given that she was up against the likes of Vashti Bunyan, Laura Cantrell and Emiliana Torrini, she must be feeling pretty good about that, right? “Yeah, it’s nice,” she shrugs. “Odd, but nice. I had no idea it was happening so it was like being hit over the head. You spend a little time feeling kind of unworthy, like awww, that’s nice.”

It’s hard to imagine that this will be Neko’s only honour in the months to come. In several respects, Fox Confessor comes dangerously close to being a masterwork, and at 35 years old, Neko feels like she’s finally found the sound that suits her best. “I kinda had a clue on Blacklisted, but as far as songwriting goes, I hadn’t been doing it all that long. I mean, in the grand scheme of things, I wasn’t disappointed with Blacklisted, not by any means, but I feel like, with this record, I’ve kind of settled into my theme. There is progression... I mean, I hope there is and that people notice it. It is a different record, although it’s not as unrelated to Blacklisted as Blacklisted was to Furnace Room Lullaby.” She needn’t worry. It’s hard not to notice the record’s incredible blend of offbeat po-
etics, mythology and grit, not to mention the black humour that really comes to the fore on songs like Star Witness ("my true love drowned in a dirty old pan of oil") and Hold On, Hold On ("I leave the party at 3am / alone, thank God / with a valium from the bride"). "The Ukrainian folktales have a bizarre sense of humour, but they are really funny. These songs relate to that tradition in the way that they're talking about pretty bleak things, but not in a really moral way," she explains. "They're talking about them in a don't-be-a-dumbass kind of way."

Previous albums have barely touched on Neko's Ukrainian ancestry, let alone scratched the surface so deeply and with such passion as Fox Confessor. So why the sudden urge to explore her European heritage, I wonder. "Basically, my Ukrainian ancestry is kinda nebulous because my family are Ukrainian but they won't talk about it or speak the language. But they have many Ukrainian traits that they can't hide, particularly the way they tell stories, and that's a big part of this record. I'd always wondered what it meant to be Ukrainian because I had no idea and I think we were the only ones in Washington, we were it. So I had no idea what that meant and, you know, many people in America don't get what it means to belong to something like a culture. If you're English, you can say 'We're English! Look at us, we've got so much history', you know, but in America everyone's sort of separated off into these weird factions. Everybody banding together and saying 'Hey, we're American' just sounds sort of gross because of the way things are over there. People aren't really ready to do that, even though that's kind of what they need to do. It's a hard position to take as an American, especially the way things are currently. We're all very unhappy about it and we all hate our government very much." She smiles ruefully.

Neko sees the album as having an overarching central theme of "loss of faith", and the obvious thought occurs that world events and the political climate in her homeland have plenty to do with it. "Yeah, they do, but it's not just about that," she says, looking up from her salad. "It's about any kind of faith really. I'm just amazed by the fact that no matter how much faith you lose, there's still a little grain of it left. It's like physics, you can't destroy matter. Sure, you can split the atom, but there's energy in there too." It's a pertinent analogy, I think, one that you can get carried away with and apply to all manner of situations. But sticking with the topic of current affairs, I suggest that the rising tide of anti-Bush sentiment in the States is exactly that kind of energy, the thirst for change that boils up in a country divided in two. "Yeah, that's the one inspiring thing. Finally, we've reached the point where people are openly speaking out against George Bush. He's so despised, especially after Hurricane Katrina." She sighs, "I'm not a Republican or a Democrat, but I don't think it was a fair election. John Kerry should've been a lot more heavy-handed with George Bush but he wasn't. There were things about him that weren't cool, but none of them are good. It's not like the Democrats are doing great things either, but they're not like Bush." It's the same here, I shrug, it feels like we're kind of running out of choices. She nods, "That's a good way to put it, running out of choices. And you know what, they're pretending we still have choices but we don't really. But it's great that things are changing enough that when he tried to open up drilling in the Arctic, Congress actually said 'get the fuck out of here'. And his argument about intellectual religion and what not, they also said 'get the fuck out of here – we are separating church and state'. That whole 'God made me do it' defence, that is so disgusting. I don't understand how he can separate himself from fundamentalist terrorists who blow people up on planes. They say that same thing as he does. He has no respect for our Constitution whatsoever, and it's not like he's the first, there have been many many horrible Presidents but, you know, he's so over the top, such a bumbling idiot."

Clearly, we could bitch about this all day, but the timely tumble of a parmesan shaving from Neko's lips lightens..."
she see herself going further down that particular avenue into more experimental song forms? “Yeah, I'd like that. I like songs to be collage-y, made up of different parts and not necessarily including a chorus. I mean, there's a couple of choruses on the new record but for the most part I get in and say one thing and then it's gone. Those are the songs I tend to like, I think they have more emotional weight.”

She hesitates slightly on the last word, perhaps a little wary of sounding pompous, and that's one of her most endearing qualities. Neko has gone on record several times to state that she has little interest in eulogising herself to the masses or to get up there on a pedestal. “I'm not out to become Faith Hill,” she once said. “I never want to play an arena the mood with a shy giggle. Besides, Neko has more interviews to do and a radio session to record this afternoon and I want to know more about her anthropomorphic protagonist, the Fox Confessor. We get to talking some more about her Ukrainian roots. “I've never been, but I'd love to go there. All I ever do is tour though so maybe we'll have to work it out so that we can tour in the Ukraine.” I tell her that my background research for the interview revealed that the country actually has a national holiday called Old Fox Day. She beams, “Really? I didn't know that!” It's a recent thing, I explain, dedicated to a character from some popular satirical novel, some kind of great strategist, a trickster. “I don't know if that's the Fox Confessor or not,” she ponders. “There are lots of different foxes, probably, but it sounds cool. Actually, the Fox Confessor kind of parallels Native American folklore; the fox has the same sort of role.”

It could be argued that the Fox Confessor kind of parallels Neko herself. Neither seem to suffer fools all that gladly or to have any truck with what might be expected of them. Both are complex characters, both are capable of great tangential convolutions. But most importantly, both are progenitors of a new way of thinking, ready to kick down outmoded constructs whilst drawing heavily on the rites of tradition. Getting back to the songs themselves, I express my admiration for the non-linear songwriting she has steadily perfected. Is she averse to a verse and refrain, I wonder, or is it simply experimentation? Does you'd just go back and listen to the song over and over. I thought that was a really powerful thing.” And sure enough, one listen to Hold On, Hold On reveals what Neko refers to as her “Freddie Mercury moment.”

Such insights reveal yet another aspect of similarity between Neko and the Fox Confessor – both are incessant observers. Reportedly carrying a tape recorder with her at all times, Neko is well known among her friends for her incredible capacity to record and store in her memory snippets of even the most fleeting of conversations. For example, the lyrics to That Teenage Feeling, perhaps the most rousing of the new album’s songs, sprang from a late-night discourse on love between Neko and her guitarist Paul Rigby. But while Neko maintains that she herself doesn’t quite know exactly what that teenage feeling is, she’s recently fulfilled a lifetime ambition to have her own radio show, or at least the modern equivalent – the podcast. Didn’t you once say you hated the internet and that you were going to “get famous the old-fashioned way, one person at a time”, I ask. “Yeah, I was just being a smartass,” she smiles. “I used to help my friend back in college with her radio show and it was really great fun. It’s one of those things where I guess I could get one if I tried but I’m never around. With podcasts you can do it in your own time and put it up on your website. I’ve done three shows so far and every show is kind of based around twenty songs. I sound like a complete idiot and some of the
songs may seem a little stupid, but I try to give people a little information about them. Lately it’s been Canadian ladies I’ve been listening to... the Feist record and I love that Martha Wainwright album. Those ladies make me feel so proud and inspired.”

Canadian music is one of my current preoccupations so I ask her opinion on the question that’s been bugging me for ages. Is there a reason why we’re witnessing a real Canadian music boom at the moment? I mean, it’s not all that long ago since all we really heard about was Celine Dion, Shania Twain and Bryan Adams. Not to mention the fact that Candle In The Wind ’97 was in the Canadian Top 20 for three ludicrous years. She shrugs, “I hadn’t really noticed. I guess I’ve been around the bands so long I already knew how great they all are. Oh wait, that makes me sound like I’m trying to be cool, but I just love Canada so much that I’m always aware of what’s going on musically because I think great music comes out of there. If you think about Canada though, it’s the largest country in the world so I think perhaps regionally they’re having a bit of a boom and I guess that people could encapsulate that as Canada in general. The regions are pretty different!” she trails off laughing. “I don’t know what my point is!”

Of course, Neko herself has played her part in the recent success of Canadian bands, receiving many an accolade for her role as a transient member of the New Pornographers. Does she find singing with the band a liberating experience, being able to play outside of her usual ‘sound’, especially given her background in the Seattle underground punk rock scene? “Yeah, it’s liberating not to have to write the songs too!” she grins. “It’s nice to be in band where you’re just a member of the band and you’re not responsible for everything. I’ve always written the songs in all the other bands I’ve been in. This is the first band where I don’t, basically, and that’s nice because I don’t have to worry about it. Dan and Carl are two of my favourite songwriters so I’m honoured that I actually get to sing the songs at all. No worrying, you just show up and there’s a great song written for you and you get to feel like a queen for a day, like “oh, that’s for me, thank you!”

No one could really call them alt-country and get away with it could they? She grimaces, “Nobody likes alt-country. Country-noir is not so bad. At least it doesn’t take itself away from country. Everybody I know and play music with loves country music so whoever made up alt-country did a horrible disservice. It’s unnecessary because it’s not like someone’s gonna pick up one of my records and one of Shania Twain’s records and say ‘which one should I get?’... I mean, that’s just not gonna happen.” She rolls her eyes and laughs, “A lot of people mistake me for Canadian though. I don’t mind, I love Canada.”

Indeed, Neko has another Canadian side project in the shape of The Corn Sisters, an old-time country duo she formed with Vancouver resident Carolyn Mark. After a number of successful shows, they released a live record, their first and only to date, in 2000. Are there any plans to make a second album I ask, perhaps a little too hopefully. “Well the thing about that is we’ve forced Kelly Hogan to be in the band with us so we’ve been doing a lot of touring together. We do like eight shows a year together, and we’re all so busy that we haven’t been able to figure out what we would do if we did an album, but we really want to,” she nods. “We have a lot of fun.”

Certainly, Neko’s rave reviews don’t stop at her studio output. As The Tigers Have Spoken showed with conviction and as many a fan would attest, Neko is a natural live performer with real command of her material, her vocals and her fawning audience. “When a person makes a record, it’s not the same as when a person buys the record and listens to it,” she explains. “I mean, you work your butt off on it, you spend months in a studio or however long it takes and you listen to every sound thousands of times, so it’s the kind of thing where when you make the record that’s the record to you and when it’s out you don’t listen to it anymore. And then it becomes about the live show and meeting your audience in the middle, because your audience interprets the record. You get together and you have this great night and that becomes the record to you.”

I open my mouth to say something gushing about what a wonderful way of looking at things that is, but her press officer appears to let us know that the reporter from The Sun (yes, really!) is here for the next interview. Time for one last question then; if she could ask anyone for any miracle, no matter how small, to restore some of that all-important lost faith, what would it be? She sighs a little, “That’s such a large question... [pause] man, if I had that answer... [long pause] well, George Bush would have to work at McDonald’s, not as a manager that’s for sure. He’d have to be the fry cook. And he’d have to know what it meant to want so, you know, the whole reformation of the American government would be a good start!” [c]
Recent years have seen a slow but welcome trickle of Nordic singer-songwriters playing acoustic, rootsy music, from Emiliana Torrini's sweetly hush hush *Fisherman’s Woman* (2005) to Ane Brun’s heartbreaking *Temporary Dive* (2005) via the likes of Maria Solheim and A Camp, the Americana side project of The Cardigans’ Nina Persson. Now, after two best-selling albums in her native Sweden, 24 year old Elin Ruth Sigvardsson is the latest to move into international waters with an eponymously-titled compilation of the best tracks from each. “It’s a little bit early to make a greatest hits,” she says shyly, “but it’s been a while since I recorded my first album [*Saturday Light Naive* (2003)] so it’s nice to pick out my favourite songs from both.” First single *When It Comes To You* was a massive airplay hit upon its original release in Sweden, and now with a bit of a production tweak it looks poised to capitalise on the new acoustic movement with a residency on the Radio 2 playlist, and the genre’s man of the moment, fellow Swede José González, is reportedly a fan.

Having recently completed a tour with the Cosmic Rough Riders, Elin has been picking up fans like velcro along the way with her engaging live performances and proven songwriting chops. Hugely inspired by Bob Dylan, she once made a pilgrimage of sorts to the Zimmerman family home in Hibbing, Minnesota whilst on a sightseeing tour of the States. “I went over for three weeks and took the greyhound buses around the Midwest. It was just a small boring village, really, pretty much like the one I come from originally – really bad weather and stuff,” she laughs. “But it was still magic to just walk around the streets where he actually grew up and see his house and all that. I’m not usually obsessed with bands or artists, but this was kinda cool.” It wasn’t always so, however. Dylan was a staple in Elin’s house as a child and like any teenager she initially rebelled against her father’s tastes. “I couldn’t stand him! Or Leonard Cohen. I just couldn’t really appreciate it until I found it on my own, when I was a little bit older,” she explains.

Having been in the public eye for a number of years now, Elin has attracted some rather choice (and some quite dubious!) comparisons along the way, including the usual nod to Joni Mitchell, but also to modern pop acts like KT Tunstall and the moody art-pop constructs of Fiona Apple. My suggestion of a slight vocal similarity with Aimee Mann is teasingly brushed aside. “People always want to compare,” she laughs. “Especially new female artists. They’re really quick to compare us to each other I think. I guess I don’t take it too seriously when people compare me to anyone because it’s different from person to person. They hear different things in the music; for instance, I can’t really see any connection between me and Joni Mitchell except that we’re both kinda folky.”

Given her almost overnight success back home – at age 21, her many glowing accolades included two Swedish Grammy nominations and a Songwriter Of The Year award – it would be understandable for someone in her position to have a hard time dealing with the limelight. “I try not to focus on that too much,” she shrugs. “I try and keep focused on what I’m doing. It was great fun, but I don’t think it affects me as a person all that much. I’m 24, so I guess there’s plenty more time.” So there won’t be any Lene Marlin-style disappearance, no urge to give it all up for the quiet life? “I’m glad I had some time to do a lot of touring and stuff back in Sweden first, but I really feel ready to see other countries and play my music in other places now. I mean, I’ve had to change some stuff – my name mostly – but I kinda like it. Ruth is a family name so I wanted to use it.”

As Joni herself once sang, “something’s lost but something’s gained in living every day” and making the most of every opportunity is clearly a part of Elin’s agenda.

Alan Pedder
Despite being astronomically famous in her native New Zealand, Bic Runga admits to feeling a bit obscure and insignificant when stepping out on British soil. But the impending release of her finest album yet in a decade-long career, that could all be about to change. With its old-fashioned jazz stylings combined with Runga’s famously keen sense of melody and wonderfully articulated emotion, Birds is so finely feathered an album that, given the chance to work its magic, will nest inside whichever compartments of your heart are still left open. Alan Pedder went to meet its creator...

Jobsworths, morons and porters lacking any semblance of spatial awareness – yes indeed, the spirit of Fawlty Towers is alive and well and doing quite nicely thankyouverymuch, even in the swankiest of posh West End hotels. I am greeted by a particularly frustrating interchange with the receptionist during which I repeatedly attempt to explain that, no, I’m not trying to check in as Bic Runga, Bic Runga’s husband or any familial iteration thereof. I’ve just come to visit, I say, for an interview. Blank stare. An inter-view, I repeat, waving my dictaphone in a perhaps too slightly crazed a manner. He looks hurriedly down at the desk and fumbles through a small pile of papers for what seems like an age. Then at last he sees it, the note taped to the desk phone – fifteen feet away, this narrow metal box. Even from my clothes rail on wheels into one of the opposite the lifts.

Two smartly uniformed men are outside of the raised bar area and opposite the lifts. Despite being astronomically famous in her native New Zealand, Bic Runga admits to feeling a bit obscure and insignificant when stepping out on British soil. But the impending release of her finest album yet in a decade-long career, that could all be about to change. With its old-fashioned jazz stylings combined with Runga’s famously keen sense of melody and wonderfully articulated emotion, Birds is so finely feathered an album that, given the chance to work its magic, will nest inside whichever compartments of your heart are still left open. Alan Pedder went to meet its creator...

pot luck navigation through unfamiliar corridors and up a secret staircase. Narnia, here I come!

I’ve been listening to Bic’s new album Birds for four or so months now since its release in New Zealand and it’s still divulging some secrets of its own. The eleven intricate songs are so delicately nuanced that it took me intensive and repeated listenings to dig beneath the richly textured arrangements, past Bic’s ever appealing and distinct manner of phrasing and into the heart of the album. Now I can’t get it out of my head and while I would normally reject outright the notion of a “timeless” new album – frankly, I’m still recovering from the fact that The Independent used that particular adjective to describe James Blunt. I mean, really! – but Birds is one hell of a temptress.

“I’ve always liked the darker songs from the fact that The Independent used that particular adjective to describe James Blunt. I mean, really! – but Birds is one hell of a temptress.

“I’ve always liked the darker songs that’s not unlike fear, you know, when you hear Diamonds Are Forever or one of those spooky love songs,” she explains as we sit a couple of feet apart on superplush sofas. For a more than twenty-times platinum-selling artist (her three studio albums have smashed all sales records back in her homeland) she seems incredibly shy, or perhaps just reticent to talk about herself. In our half hour together, she gets most animated when we chat about sheepdogs and the ideas that drive Wears The Trousers. At these times, when she laughs, there’s no doubt she means it and she exudes a genuine warmth. At other times, she’ll answer my questions without ever meeting my gaze as she twirls the ribbon on her pink frilly blouse around and between her fingers. Sometimes she switches to playing with her hair, now fashioned in a sleek modern bob rather than the feathered fringe and long tresses depicted on the strikingly simple sleeve of the album.

“I just turned thirty,” she explains. “That was a really big thing for me and I got a bit carried away and cut all my hair off. I just thought the old me is gone and it’s good to be a… woman. It really is. I’m so glad my twenties are over, because I hated my twenties more than puberty. I was so awkward. The whole time I felt so self-conscious like I was in a cocoon. But I put a lot of effort into my thirtieth. I took my whole family to China, which is something none of us have ever done even though we’re of Chinese descent. And so seeing the vastness of China for the first time and having that mess of curiosity in my mind satisfied was really quite an experience.”

 Quite an experience was also had shortly afterwards when she was chosen to receive the New Zealand Order of Merit (the equivalent of the British MBE) in the Queen’s New Years Honours list. How many thirty year olds can say that? Did she find it weird, being so young? “I actually felt really good about it. I was in there among a big list of people who’ve done really amazing altruistic things or things for their community and things in medicine. So an award for services to music is really nice. Of course, it’s in perspective, it’s just one part of things that are done, but it’s really nice to be regarded in that way. And by law now I can actually pee on the left rear wheel of a horse and cart,” she laughs. Does she
plan to test that out? “Er, no, I think I’ll pass,” she smiles.

Birds, then, is the sound of Bic Runga trying to connect with the past and succeeding beautifully. “No one’s really doing any good torch songs in pop music these days. I guess in the Sixties it was their big commercial currency, like their version of the power ballad,” she laughs. The album was recorded mostly live in the studio with a cast of guest musicians that reads like a Who’s Who of New Zealand pop icons (and the odd Australian added in for good measure). Neil Finn, Anika Moa, Benny ‘Boxcar’ Maitland, Tim Arnold of Pluto and Shayne Carter from Straitjacket Fits all contributed in one form or another. “I didn’t feel alone making this record,” she says, “Usually I feel kind of isolated but this time I really allowed myself to ask for help. I had Neil with me though, so that was half the job done. He really is so skilled. He didn’t want to do anything but play the piano on the record, and it wasn’t until he did some backing vocals at the end, as overdubs, that I thought ‘oh my god, you’re Neil Finn and you’re going doo wop on my record’; y’know. I was like, wow, that’s really cool!”

She has high praise too for Moa: “Anika keeps me afloat. She really is one of the funniest people I’ve ever met. You know, at any time during a recording, things can take a nosedive and you can really fold when things go wrong, but just to have people around to keep you buoyant and keep you laughing is really helpful. There’s nothing worse than taking a song to a band and having them ruin it, but with this band they weren’t really my songs at all, they were our songs, and that really improved them. There was such a synergy between us as players that the songs just really evolved…”

An unexpected knock at the door distracts us both and after half a minute or so of confusion over who is going to answer it, Bic gets up to greet the intruders. Unbelievably, it’s the porters from downstairs standing proudly in the doorway with the clothes rail now reassembled and shining in the hall. The disappointment on their faces is an absolute picture when Bic explains that she has no idea why they thought she would even want it. Bless them, they must have lugged it piece by piece up the secret staircase and all for scant reward. Visibly tickled, she sits back down laughing and continues to talk about the recording.

Bic and her band of helpers holed up at Monte Cecilia, an old stately home in Auckland, for the month-long recording session. “The house was really beautiful but in a total state of disrepair. It definitely had that kind of faded splendour that we were kinda fascinated by. And it sort of suits the album. If the tragic torch song belongs to any kind of environment, it would be that kind of house in ruin. I really wanted to record the space into the album, record the sound of the room. We were really just hoping for it to sound like nothing hanging on nothing, really sparse, as if it were floating in space. Being called a singer-songwriter doesn’t really say much about your styles, and these...
days it’s become this kind of innocuous commercial sound and I just didn’t want to make that kind of record.”

Perhaps where *Birds* is most successful is that the songs are not simply impersonations of torch songs or a facile exercise in being knowingly retro. Genuine tragedy is infused into everything from the vocal to the tender strains of the string octet, inspired by the death of Bic’s father Joe, a former Maori soldier, in early 2005. I ask her whether her outlook has changed at all as a result. “Entirely different,” she nods. “It’s like everything’s suddenly 360 degree vision and not the smallness of the way you see yourself and the world before. But most of all, I’m not scared anymore, you know. I’m not dead so I may as well just get on with being alive. When you’re faced with death, you kinda realise what it really is and that’s there’s plenty of time for being dead. There’s a little part of you that wants to live the life that your parents can’t have anymore and it’s important that the things you do represent them well. The Maori culture is so deep. The experience of his funeral was so traditional an unusual. There’s a lot of protocol, which I was actually learning as I went along, in the way that Maori culture treats the dead. Ancestors are really revered, and there’s this concept that you’re not just yourself, you’re one of a long line of ancestors before and also a long line that come after. So you’re only ever one link in a chain and that’s quite a strong idea. You don’t feel alone and that’s a new one for me and held me in quite good stead.”

Like Rosanne Cash’s recent elegiac album *Black Cadillac* and Beth Nielsen Chapman’s *Sand & Water* (1995), *Birds* is also imbued with gentle rays of hope — for example, the chorus of the radio-friendly album opener, *Winning Arrow*, begins with the words “cast off your sorrows / the long night will end” — and it’s obvious that Bic took great comfort in having her friends around her. In March and April of last year, she embarked on a world tour supporting Neil and his brother Tim, before heading to Monte Cecilia. I remark on the sense of community spirit that New Zealander musicians seem to have, at least compared with British popmongers, many of whom are only too quick to snipe at each other in the press. “It’s too small in New Zealand to really bitch about anyone,” she laughs. “Y’know, it wouldn’t be a smart thing to do. But I do think we sort of fight to create a community, because I think being a musician can be really difficult and we kind of have to stick together. With this project, for instance, just instigating all these people to come together was, well, not totally normal, but y’know, it wasn’t a shock.”

Of course, in the UK, any artist who becomes as ubiquitous in the charts as Bic Runga has in New Zealand would be instantly subjected to mass ridicule and relentless snidey comments from the press, who seem to delight as much in bringing down our celebrities as they do in making them. Actually, probably more. Has Bic experienced a similar sort of backlash as, say, Coldplay? She laughs, “Not to my face! But actually people have been really good to me, and, you know, I’m always nervous that it’s only a matter of time before they turn. But I’m kind of ready for that these days, I don’t really think it would matter that much now if they did. I think as a musician you have to develop a fairly thick skin! You know, I can’t second guess what’s going to work commercially… it’s not that I don’t care about it, it’s just that it would do my head in if I had to think about what might work. You could try and write something for the radio but it still might not get played and then you’ll just feel silly, being cheesy like that.”

“Maybe I could’ve had a big worldwide hit if I’d worked with this A-list producer or that clever mixer,” she continues. “But I’ve been signed [to Sony] for ten years now and I made the decision to produce myself really early on, whether it was right or wrong, just to do whatever I liked. A friend of mine was working with Jane Campion, the director who made *The Piano*, a long time ago. He was doing the soundtrack for her and he kept trying to tell her what to do with it and stuff, and she just looked at him and said, ‘my wrong decision is more important than your right decision!’… it was her vision, and even if it was a little bit weird or not quite the norm, at least it’s what she wanted, and I’m the same.”

I ask where her vision will take her next as she has hinted in recent interviews that she might be contemplating a return to the rockier songs of her debut album *Drive* (1996). “I really like rock ‘n’ roll… I don’t know if I do it well though. I don’t think so,” she shrugs. “But yeah, sometimes it gets really tedious being an earnest singer-songwriter. It’s really boring, even to myself, so sometimes I do just want to rock. To me, the benchmark of rock ‘n’ roll is like Led Zeppelin. I couldn’t do that, but there is something wonderfully free about it. The music I do takes so much control. When I think about women who rock, I think of people like Grace Jones, Debbie Harry… or, well, not in the rock genre, but Yoko Ono. They’re so themselves, you know. Yoko’s amazing, I really love her. I love her art and I even like her singing. It’s amazing that she’s over 70!”

Bic hasn’t played the rockier numbers from *Drive* for quite some time now, but, to these ears at least, they still sound pretty convincing on record. For now though, the sometimes eerie, often melancholy and utterly beguiling *Birds* will more than suffice. “I find birds thoroughly creepy, really weird, and certainly in Maori mythology they do come from another place, some strange underworld. Some signify good omens, some bad omens… some signify death…” she pauses thoughtfully for a moment. “The trouble with birds is that there’s no way of knowing quite what they’re thinking!” she laughs.
morbid romantic
With two truly extraordinary albums already under her belt, 25 year old balladeer Marissa Nadler has been bewitching audiences all over the globe with her unique blend of literate old time Americana. Alan Pedder caught up with her over email to talk about her latest project...

You describe your new record as "psychedelic Carter Family meets Leonard Cohen," a description that makes me infeasibly excited to hear it. It's also shaping up to be your most personal to date, as you've done away with the character shows that characterised your first two records. Was that inspired by a preoccupation with real events or have you simply outgrown your need for escapism, however temporarily?

Well, I think that to the outside listener, people thought that Mayflower May (a prevalent character in my first two records) was an imaginary person, as with my other characters (Mr. John Lee, Henry, Lilly, Mary, etc...). Yet, they were strongly representative of people in my life, drawing parallels, but perhaps meeting different fates. Therefore, many of the characters were iconic, and the songs were acting like parables. Writing with fictional names freed me up to have more leeway in how I wrote about people I loved, lost, etceteras. On the new record, I simply have stopped using 'stage names' for my friends, perhaps to feel more connected to them. I would never have called the early writings escapism, but rather an exercise in what happens when creative writing meets non-fiction. Now, it seems my song writing has tilted the pendulum towards the non-fiction arena.

I know the negative connotations of the singer-songwriter label are something you are wary of, and the first two records have neatly sidestepped traditional singer-songwriterisms by virtue of their anachronistic, fantastical themes. With this album, how did you go about bringing personal stories to the fore whilst still maintaining your stance?

The production alone on the new record is so removed from the vein of the traditional singer-songwriter that it is not a worry to me. The harmonies and synth tracks take it into a very psychedelic prism and my affinity towards a bit of effect on my voice also puts it into more into the ‘realms of the unreal.’ I must say that although the songs are more personal, they are more melancholic and fatalistic than ever, and perhaps have more weight now that they are based completely in reality. They are songs about dying friends, lost love, the same thematic and aesthetic sensibilities will always run along the rivers of my creative veins. A very young friend of mine recently passed away, and his vanishment from this earth made such an impact on me than almost every song is about him, and about where our spirits might travel to posthumously. As for the singer-songwriter trappings, I did not mean to dismiss the genre, yet only to state that I see myself aiming towards a different goal. I wouldn’t think it would be far fetched that you might see me in the future in a sidelines troupe kind of band. I have always loved circus performers. Oh, I am getting sidetracked. Well, regardless of what genre music falls into, I think a good song is a good song, although everything is always subject to taste. I think as I get older, I am less fearful of being categorised and pigeonholed, and my focus is less on what kind of image I am putting forth and more about the songs, the music and connecting with people.

Whatever happened to your character Flora Barone, Queen of the Vaudeville Show? Is she still gonna get a record of her own someday? Her eponymous theme song has whetted many appetites for more of her exploits!

Yeah, I really like to sing that song, but it is an entirely fictional story. A friend and me wrote the song one night, with the goal of trying to write the most horrible things that could ever happen to one person in a lifetime: she buries her daughter, her husband, her mother, and her life, clinging on to the strand of hair her mother gave her. Now that you mention it, I might throw it on the new one and dedicate it to you. Now that I think of it, this is still kind of about one of the first questions, I suppose reading fiction and non-fiction books can be equally moving and life changing. I felt just as moved reading Patrick Suskind’s Perfume or Nabokov’s Ada as I did reading a book like Natural History Of The Senses, by a great non-fiction writer Diane Ackerman. It is strange that in the songwriting field, people seem to favour soul-baring memoirs to a moving moral fictional story.

Your new album was co-produced with Greg Weeks of Espers. You two have been friends for a while, right? How did the collaboration come about?

I met him while I was on tour with Nick Castro and Josephine Foster, which was my first time touring maybe almost two years ago now. We went down to Philadelphia, where Greg and the other Espers live. I really liked him immediately. I thought it would be a fruitful marriage of his technical savvy and vintage recording equipment and my technically intuitive approach to have him co-produce the record. Especially when he has so many great musicians hanging around his house.

From your description, it seems that you’ve really tried to experiment more with your sound. Your first two records were mostly very spartan, with few obvious overdubs. With this album, have you enjoyed being able to indulge more in your love of vocal arrangements? What other things have you tried?

I think I have grown more confident with trying out more daring harmonies. I was so shy and lacking in confidence throughout so much of my life that it takes a lot to get the guts up to exercise my instincts in a studio setting. But, I have tried a lot of harmonies, and lots of synths really. Helena [Espvall, Espers’ cellist] adds a lot of string sections and they really do add an Eleanor Rigby kind of vibe or something.

Your five-part harmony cover of Famous Blue Raincoat sounds incredible, and it’s such an amazing song. The depth of tragedy that goes on in human relationships... you rarely hear a better distillation of that in a song than this one. I know you’ve been almost a lifelong fan of Cohen, but what drew you to this song in particular? Which of the three characters, if any, do you most identify with?

I really like the album Songs Of Love & Hate. There is a rawness to it, like he is on the brink of madness. When the album opens with Avalanche, you know you are in for a ride through the depths of his subconscious workings. Famous Blue Raincoat is one of my favorite songs off of that record. I have been covering it for years, but for recording it, I decided to try something really different. I think I identify most with Cohen’s character, the narrator, in that he lives...
in nostalgic times. And I always seem to get myself involved in sordid situations like he does in that song.

I read that Bob Dylan was another big influence of yours. What do you think of his latest forays into exclusive deals with Starbucks and that Victoria's Secret underwear ad? Isn't it sort of depressing? I'd rather he did a Joni Mitchell and denounced the cesspool of the music industry and indignantly retire than sully his reputation.

Yeah. Well, I suppose I feel like he has already proved himself to be a major contributor to the collective consciousness of generations, so if he wants to get some free lingerie for his lady friends, so be it. He was really revolutionary to modern music and songwriting and to a whole movement. I guess I feel like he deserves a get out of jail free card. I suppose that making your music available at Starbucks and the girls that shop at Victoria's Secret might change some lives. Maybe Bob will have such an influence on them that they will stop wearing expensive bras and lingerie, and focus on what's really important. I am just playing the devil's advocate. I mean, of course I think it is “depressing.” Kind of betraying, but I feel like anything Bob does is cool. Maybe he wants to take the money and buy a bungalow in Tangiers, and write one last great album, à la Blood On The Tracks or something.

When we first spoke, you described yourself as a “closet righteous babe.” It's really interesting that none of the women who are coming up through this whole anti-/alt-/acid-folk ‘movement’ really associate themselves with any sort of feminist message. For instance, when Joanna Newsom sings “when you go away/ I am big boned and fey” or “your skin is something that I stir into my tea,” it's almost the opposite, like it's almost too romantic to bear (in a good way). And maybe that's why all the times I've seen her play, the male/female audience ratio is perhaps five times that of any Ani DiFranco show. Is feminism still scary?

I guess the new feminism is not to be anti-men, but to be strong, accomplished and feminine. You mention Joanna Newsom. She is an amazing musician and has major songwriting chops, and she is a self-made woman, yet she allows herself to be feminine. Regina Spektor, the CocoRosie girls, there is a whole new breed. When CocoRosie sing “to be your housewife”... I know that song caused a lot of speculation by people that thought it was degrading. It is ok for a woman to yearn for domesticity, and ok and modern to play house, as far as I am concerned. The fact that they are attractive and girly yet powerful is I think what impresses the men, and why the male audience is so drawn to Joanna Newsom. Wonderwoman was hot. And she got things done. I am not saying you need to be attractive, but instead of hiding it, you should embrace it. I am probably also way too “romantic” to bear, with pre-Raphaelite hair and gowns, singing about lost love like a damsel in distress. But, that is my choice. To be a woman that is successful in her career and also feminine, romantic, and unashamed of that; that is as feminist to me as the older version, which seems to have grown a bit antiquated of late. It's like those stitch and bitch parties, where liberal women who fancy themselves ‘feminists’ are going back to the kitchen, and saying its ok. Where a bunch of liberal young girls with leftist leanings will get together and knit. It seems strange, what happened to fighting for the cause? But embracing femininity to me is the new kind of feminist.

While we're on the subject of feminists, let's talk about Anne Sexton, whose poem Her Kind you've set to music on the new album. What drew you to that particular piece? I have always loved that poem. It talks of madness and forays into the dark depths of humanity. I studied the poem in school, and there is some elusive Holocaust imagery in the lines, “I have ridden in your cart, driver, waved my nude arms at villages going by, and woman like that is not afraid to die.” I found the poem very moving, and I am hoping I am allowed to put the song on my record. I have to look into it.

This adaptation is the latest of your adventures in setting poems to music. The Pablo Neruda and Edgar Allen Poe pieces on Ballads Of Living & Dying are exceptional, really stop-in-your-tracks fantastic. I read in an old interview that you were drawn to these writers whose private lives were tragic. Does that influence your enjoyment of Sexton's poems? Yes. I like the morbid, tragic characters. What can I say. There is this website I go to sometimes, called poets.org. It has listening booths where you can listen to great poems by great poets. Anne Sexton reads Her Kind. Her voice is so troubled, and so gravely. I suppose I am just as drawn to her troubled life as I am to her poetry.

Some of my favorite poetic adaptations are Bjork's e.e. cummings tracks and an Emily Dickinson poem that Natalie Merchant recorded, Because I Could Not Stop For Death. Beautiful! Do you have any favors? Marianne Faithful doing Annabelle Lee maybe. I hope I got that right.

OK, let's talk about the artwork for the record. I read that you were thinking of putting together a more collaborative effort, perhaps with contributions from your mum and your friends. How's it looking?

It's looking good. I want to use my friend Rachel Mosler's artwork for the cover if she lets me, and my mother's painting somewhere also.

I'm really looking forward to catching your European tour with Jana Hunter in May. Do you see her as a bit of a kindred spirit? Aside from the fact that you both use a fair bit of reverb on your vocals. Are there any other female artists you feel an affinity for?

I love Jana's music, especially the song All The Best Wishes. Patti Smith, Nico, Joni Mitchell, Clara Rockmore, the Portuguese fado singers, Odetta, Elizabeth Cotton, Nina Simone, Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, Maybelle Carter. I don't know. I like the old stuff, you know?

You used to be quite reticent about performing. Are you at a stage now where that's become a lesser issue than the other less endearing aspects of touring? What do you enjoy most about your travels? Is there anywhere you're just dying to get back to? I am getting better but still have major issues. I don't know how long I am going to be able to tour, it takes such a toll on me in terms of nerves. I still have major stage fright. People always tell me I look really nervous on stage. I might go back to Greece. I really loved it there. The slow pace of life, and such a sense of culture that is profoundly lacking in the US.

Finally, a life without sadness is...? A life without art. ■
Emm Gryner is in possession of a mightily persistent flame, strong and blazing like she’s bathed in gasoline. Igniting out of Toronto in 1998, the Canadian singer-songwriter scored a hit single with *Summerlong*, just one of a number of strong tracks from her major label debut, *Public* – a reinterpretation of her independent, self-produced album, *The Original Leap Year* (1996). Soon thereafter, in the wake of a record label merger, the songstress was dropped cold in the dark by Mercury Records. Refusing to allow her talent to be extinguished, Gryner returned to her indie beginnings, resurrected her independent label Dead Daisy Records, and self-released her next album, *Science Fair*, in 1999. “Major labels ignore great music, and I’m too impatient to wait for other people to do things for me, so I started the label” says the ambitious artist.

Since then, Gryner has self-produced another four albums, earned herself two Juno nominations for Best Pop Album of the Year in 1999 and 2002 and toured with an impressive cast of characters, including the likes of Sarah McLachlan, Alanis Morissette, The Cardigans, Jann Arden and the legendary David Bowie. “Insane and wonderful. Inspiring and challenging,” she says, reminiscing on touring with Bowie. “It was great fun running all over Europe and getting to hang with famous people. I am grateful for the time with him. His music will always mean something a little different to me.”

Running or touring all over Europe, across Canada and the United States has not altered this Ontarian’s concept of home, however. Gryner feels her place will always be where she was raised by her Filipino mother and her German–Irish father in Forest, Ontario. “I love the people in my little town. That’s an ideal society to me, a place where people can have differing views but somehow co-exist, go for beers together and have general, basic human respect for each other”.

This independent young woman also seeks a similar utopia in the workplace. Gryner ensures that she receives respect and avoids discrimination whilst working in production, a position held by a fairly larger number of men than women in our male-dominated society. “I think we create our own reality sometimes. If you allow oppression then it’s more likely to happen. I just do what I do, and I don’t deal with people who don’t get it. There’s not a lot of time for disrespect in my 24-hour day” she declares. “We live in a dude’s world and that’s a shame because if women had more power, and the opportunity to be in positions of power, we’d have a hell of a lot more balance and a lot less men running the universe who accidentally shoot their friends on the quail range!”

Pyrophobics better watch out because Emm Gryner has recently extended her fiery talents to encompass a newly formed band, appropriately named Hot One. The band consists of guitarist Jordie Kern, Kevin March, who recently played with Guided By Voices, and Cardigans singer Nina Persson’s husband, former Shudder To Think guitarist Nathan Larson, who is perhaps equally as famous for his film scores, which include *Boys Don’t Cry*, *The Woodsman* and *Dirty Pretty Things*. “We just recorded our first record!” she says excitedly. “I love being in a band with people who really embody the rock ‘n’ roll mentality, but also have a secret passion for commenting on the ills of the world.”

Gryner will also release another solo album – her eighth in as many years – this coming June. *The Summer Of High Hopes* was recorded partly in Sweden and partly at home in her basement, exemplifying her jet-set ambition but still loyal to her indie nature. In addition to Gryner’s already numerous conquests, she’s expressed a keen interest in composing film scores and commencing a family. “I want to do it all and I’m crazy enough to think I can”, she laughs.

Marc Soucy
Imagine admitting to Beyoncé Knowles that you don’t really ‘get’ modern R&B, or telling Whitney Houston that you thought her last album was, well, a bit rubbish. Sparks might fly, tempers could fray and steely gazes would most certainly be fixed upon you. Not that you’d likely get the chance, of course. Today’s diva main comes with a hefty side order of interfering, overprotective PR and a carefully steered interview template. But 26 year old Londoner Terri Walker is by no means such a fusspot or drama queen. When Alan Pedder goes to meet her at a posh champagne bar in Soho (“my label owners run it, it’s just easier,” she explains), the absence of any press rep whatsoever is conspicuously refreshing. “I’ve been here on my own for hours!” she beams. Now, about that last album…

“I’m not good at being fake,” she laughs. “I wasn’t disappointed with L.O.V.E. itself… I mean, it’s definitely not me, Terri Walker, because Terri Walker isn’t really the whole poppy side of things. I like my music to be fun, I like it to be witty, but the whole commercial aspect, no. If it had been up to me, that album wouldn’t have been the way it was. A lot of the songs are still me, but there’s four or five tracks that definitely aren’t!”

With her stylishly quirky debut Untitled (2003) scoring four nods at the MOBOs and a prestigious Mercury Music Award nomination, you’d have thought that an if-it-ain’t-broke-don’t-fix-it approach might have been better, but as Terri explains: “Basically, the first album didn’t sell tons and they [that is, her then label Def Jam UK/ Mercury] wanted me to open more doors. But they didn’t want to spend any money on tours and live performances, which they should have known is my strongest point, being out there properly singing. Not just going down the clubs and getting on the mic and saying ‘hey wassup!’, you know.”

She’s right on the money, of course. I attended one of Terri’s recent showcases for her new album I Am, her first for London-based record label Dekkor, and was quite blown away by the sheer quality of her voice – a powerful blend of classic soul influences and neo-soul sparkle – and her positively infectious enthusiasm. Her frankness, too, was welcomingly apparent; “Here’s another single that didn’t get released,” she cackled without inhibition as she launched into one of L.O.V.E.’s overlooked finer moments in front of an industry audience.

Everything about the new album, it seems, from the title in, is about reclaiming her sense of self. “Completely!” she nods. “I Am is basically saying I don’t care what people think. I’ve gotten rid of my weave and I’m back to my natural hair, being who I am. I just thought I had to show that to people because others, you know, get caught up in the industry, trying to be on the cover of heat…. I mean, who gives a damn?”

She can certainly speak from experience on that front. Whilst in the Def Jam camp, Terri professes to having been under pressure from the label to conform to certain media expectations. “Oh god yeah, I was told to lose weight, to look a certain way, to be at this party or that party, to mingle with such and such a person, and that was so not me. If I don’t like you, you are gonna know about it!” she laughs. “Or, y’know, I’ll just say nothing. That whole thing, to me, was awful. I’d much rather hang out with my friends, have a laugh, watch DVDs and just be stupid. I do have to work, obviously, but to me it shouldn’t have to be that way.”

Things at Dekkor, it seems, are much more to her liking. So often with R&B music it’s difficult to see where the artist begins and the super-producer or record label ends, but Terri appears to enjoy a great deal more artistic freedom than most. “I basically said to them before I signed to them, ‘I’m gonna do what I wanna do and if you don’t like it, I’m not signing to you!’… and they were like ‘Terri, do your thing’, you know. She grins triumphantly. “And you’re right about the distinction. I hope that a lot of people will be able to pick me out and say ‘that’s Terri Walker’. I’ve been lucky because I’ve been able to just sing about what I wanna sing about and to have my own style, so yeah, it’s great!”

As you might expect, the Terri Walker style is no static concept and takes in a wider range of influences than your average pop star. Untitled, for example, features the minute-long interlude Deutschland, a song she wrote in German from scratch. “I lived in Germany from when I was about four ‘til the age of seventeen, eighteen, so Germany, for me, is sort of like my first home. You know your teen years are really what sort of moulds you, so it made me what I am. It’s a brilliant country. Will I write another song in German? Hopefully! I wouldn’t mind actually doing a whole album in German. It’s a bit weird, some of the phrasing, but not as harsh as you’d think.”

I ask her why she thinks it is that black British female R&B artists often don’t get the accolades or commercial rewards of their American counterparts, and why, even when they do, their success is so short-lived.
“random shots of butt cheeks and tits hanging out... who cares anymore, it’s so not sexy”

“The thing is, the Americans come out with it quicker and faster and it’s such quality, isn’t it? Once you’ve already had a Beyoncé and someone comes and tries to do another thing like that, people will think she’s not as good as Beyoncé ‘cos she came out first. It’s weird, I look at Mica Paris and Chaka Khan, both of whom are phenomenal for me, but because Chaka Khan came out first people are always gonna compare Mica Paris to her. But Chaka Khan is actually a big ass fan of Mica Paris, but people never look at that.”

She talks excitedly for a moment about getting involved with the tenth anniversary of In Celebration Of My Sisters, an annual event featuring a wide range of black singers (including Mica Paris and, er, Voices With Soul from The X Factor), actresses, comedienne, poets and dancers all paying homage to International Women’s Month. “They asked me to be a part of it, celebrating the sisterhood. We need to support each other, that’s what it’s about.”

Getting back to the state of British R&B, I ask her why that whenever a black woman achieves a high level of success, it always seems short-lived. Take last year’s Ms Dynamite backlash, what a fall from grace that was. Then there’s Beverley Knight who is immensely talented but never seems able to gather any career momentum. “In this country, we’re a minority, a very small percentage, and guitar music in this country is so dominant it’s ridiculous, you know what I mean? So for us to stand out we have to do something completely different for people to go ‘oh, that sounds interesting, let me kinda prick my ears up’. In a way, if it’s inoffensive, they like it, but when it’s too raw and too much to say, I think it frightens them a bit. Y’know, I’ve got something to say, Ms Dynamite’s got something to say, Beverley Knight’s always got something to say, so maybe it’s just too much outspokenness.”

I suggest that the problem with Ms Dynamite’s last album was that people thought she had too much to say and not enough tunes. “I dunno. I mean, you’ll see someone getting beaten up on the street and people will walk round and just leave it, instead of go-
‘All my girlfriends always say to me ‘I Am’, it was sexy but it was tasteful, you know? It’s natural. You’re gonna end up being an actress, you’re gonna end up being a designer or owning a restaurant or this big massive entrepreneur. I think people like her are my favourite actors, movies, anything with Bette Davis. I love old school freak. I love old school.’

I think it’s great having the Corinne Bailey Rae album out at the moment because it’s just about her being natural and riding a bicycle in the video. It’s natural. People go out and have a bicycle ride and hang out with their mates. Beautiful. And it went to number one, which is brilliant.

Does she think it’s symptomatic of the fact that a lot of artists these days don’t feel that there’s a certain amount of responsibility that comes with being famous? “So glad you asked that actually, because I’m a complete old school freak. I love old school movies, anything with Bette Davis. People like her are my favourite actresses. I think people do forget that they are role models. Take people like Pete Doherty. Kids see him getting arrested for drugs, drink driving or whatever. I think they do forget that they are people that kids, or anyone, even grown-ups, look up to.”

If she had just five minutes and the use of a time machine, Terri is quite clear about the advice that she would impart to her younger self. “Do not compromise who you are! I kind of did for the second album... so, yeah, don’t ever! Believe in yourself. I’ve always believed in myself, and that’s how I’ve managed to make this new album, which I really love. I mean, it was done quite quickly, but the next one, I’m definitely going to take more time with it and really craft it. A lot of the songs on I Am were written around the time of L.O.V.E., but just didn’t get used because they wanted it to be commercial. So now I’m kind of bursting to get the real me out there instead of the commercial Terri.”

The first peach of a single to drop from the tree of I Am will be Alright With Me, a song that she describes as her own version of My Funny Valentine. “All my girlfriends always say to me ‘you always go for the unconventional guys’. You know, they’re like ‘oh that man, he’s so this, he’s so that’ and I’m thinking how boring! I want someone whose got a bit more personality, a bit of quirk. So it’s basically saying I don’t care what they think, I love him, he makes me smile, he makes me laugh and feel great, and that’s what it’s about.”

Has she found true love then? She shakes her head, “I’m only 26, I’ve got loads of time. Have you?” I think so, I reply, it’s been nearly three years now. “Wow, that’s not bad going! How do you make it last though, I get bored so quickly!” I think the secret is to find someone who wants the same things out of life as you do, I say. She looks thoughtful for a moment... “how old are you anyway? Same as me? Oh my god, you don’t look it!” she laughs. “When you first came in I actually thought who is this kid, what kind of questions is he gonna ask me?”

I squirm in my seat, suitably embarrassed, quickly pointing out the latest in a growing procession of wrinkles. “Shut up!” she laughs. “Seriously, you could be a model. Take it from Terri Walker, I know these things!” Must be the light in here, I say. Besides, I’ve got horrible teeth. “Whatever! Anyway, you’re much too sweet to be a model.” Yeah? Just you wait, I warn her, you’ll get the new issue and your article will say ‘that Terri Walker, what an absolute bitch!’... not really of course, but a promise is a promise.
a buyer’s guide to...

kd lang
So understated that she doesn’t even need capital letters, kd lang has been making music for over twenty years, constantly carving a personal oeuvre of unique country-poliitan sounds and condensing her experiences and emotions into tight musical packages. Much of her recent success has been in re-imagining and interpreting standards on her celebrated covers albums and through these she continues to maintain a dedicated audience.

Born in Alberta, Canada, lang was first drawn to the music of country legend Patsy Cline, starring in a college theatrical production of the country singer’s life and later christening her first band “the reclines” in an affectionate tribute. Canada’s prestigious Juno Awards named her Most Promising Female Vocalist in 1985 and lang was soon kicking up the dust on the well travelled Nashville trail to success. With the impending release of lang’s first retrospective, the most excellently titled 

**Reintarnation**, Shelley Ali flicks through the vinyl and shuffles her CDs to help you follow in kd’s tracks.

Although they were pretty much ignored commercially, lang’s recordings with the reclines inspired legendary Nashville producer Owen Bradley (Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn) to come out of retirement for this, her first true solo album. It was a fruitful partnership; first single *I’m Down To My Last Cigarette* was her first to break the country top forty and the album soon became a word of mouth hit. Recorded in “Bradley’s Barn”, the acoustics lend a deep echo to lang’s gorgeous vocals. Laden with strings, the polished mix of pure country standards and soaring ballads make this a must buy.

**Ingénue**
*Sire, 1992*

Prior to the release of her fourth studio album *Ingénue*, lang infamously outed herself during an interview for *The Advocate* magazine, but that did not stop it from becoming lang’s biggest commercial hit. Although there is a classic approach to pop songs here, it’s hard to define the genre of this deeply expressive album. Including ten original compositions, the general theme is certainly one of heartbreak and unrequited love. It has moments of pain that you can physically feel (e.g. *Wash Me Clean*), but, conversely, as with *Miss Chatelaine*, her heart is soaring and she becomes Doris Day. *Constant Craving* may have cemented her status in the public consciousness, but the album needs to be listened to in its entirety to understand the emotional journey. Sexy, sultry, lush, and simply beautiful, it’s an album that lang has yet to top.

**A Wonderful World**
*Columbia, 2003*

A collection of duets and covers recorded with Tony Bennett, the album provoked a few odd couple comments, but their collaboration is an effortless celebration of Louis Armstrong songs. Produced by T-Bone Burnett of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Walk The Line* fame, the album showcased a musical symbiosis that easily defied the generational gap. Taking on a dozen of the jazz legend’s repertoire, from *What A Wonderful World* to *Dream A Little Dream Of Me* via *Ma Vie En Rose* and *Lucky Old Sun*, the pair’s enjoyment of the material is keenly felt. Fans, however, may prefer 2004’s *Hymns Of The 49th Parallel* as a covers album; lang only appears on her own twice in this outing, but her voice has never been smokier. Breathtaking and timeless.

**Drag**
*Warner Bros., 1997*

From the neat wordplay of the title in, this is an album themed around smoking and addiction. Dark and sexy, lang seductively replays Steve Miller’s *The Joker* (“I’m a midnight toker”) and The Hollies’ *The Air That I Breathe* (self-explanatory here) as if she really were surrounded by swirls of smoke in a darkened cabaret bar. A light and listenable album with more ambition than is usually found on a traditional covers record.

**Absolute Torch & Twang**
*Sire, 1989*

This would prove to be lang’s last country album proper, and is another mix of originals and covers. By this time, however, lang had truly found her voice, pitching herself between country balladry and lounge chanteuse as evidenced on two of her best songs *Pullin’ Back The Reins* and *Trail Of Broken Hearts*. Her collaborative efforts with producer and songwriter Ben Mink were reaching their peak on this definitive record.

**The Fabulous Three**

*Shadowland*  *Sire, 1988*

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Hymns Of The 49th Parallel
Nonesuch, 2004

On this nicely conceived tribute to Canada and its music, lang pays respect to her favourite artists, including the marvellous Jane Siberry and Joni Mitchell. The choice of songs may seem rather predictable (Neil Young’s *Heart Of Gold*, Leonard Cohen’s *Hallelujah*), but as a celebration of some of the finest lyricists to grace any country, the material is pure class. A stripped-down affair with simple arrangements that were intended to allow the music to speak for itself; however, with a voice like lang’s this sometimes proves difficult! Though restrained at times, this is a firm fan favourite and even has a ‘cover’ of lang’s own *Simple*.

**WORTH A POP**

Even Cowgirls Get The Blues OST
Sire, 1993

This soundtrack to the Gus van Sant dramatisation of Tom Robbins’ classic novel is lang’s personal favourite. Unlike most soundtracks that are merely aural scenery, this collection tells the story itself. Themes run through a pick ‘n’ mix bag of musical styles, including funky little numbers (*Keep Me Movin’*), pop songs (*Hush Sweet Lover*) and spit ‘n’ sawdust country (*Don’t Be A Lemming Polka*). The incidental tracks also form part of the musical tapestry and even include a minute waltz!

Also recommended: *Live By Request* (Warner Bros., 2001) – taken from the cable network show of the same name, lang covers her whole career to date. Buy the DVD rather than the CD to witness lang’s endearing personal banter with her hungry audience; the disc leaves only the occasional “thank you”.

INVINCIBLE SUMMER
Warner Bros., 2000

Madly in love with then girlfriend Leisha Hailey during the recording of these songs, *Invincible Summer* is kd lang’s album d’amour. Infused with hitherto untapped warmth, the lush production perfectly suits the light-hearted and fluffy material. Song titles like *The Consequences Of Falling* and *Love’s Great Ocean* are a dead giveaway to the album’s inspiration and the whole affair soon becomes a welcome hug in your headphones. As is often the case, the general consensus after this album was that heartbreak makes for better material.

FOR THE FANS

A Truly Western Experience
Bumstead, 1984

The sleeve of this quirky debut from kd lang and the reclines really says it all, depicting kd balancing atop a cartoon fence with Patsy Cline’s face looking out from a hay barn. Featuring the gloriously odd *Hooked On Junk*, this short, sweet album comes in at around 27 minutes, with lang’s jokey but gorgeous vocals providing just a hint of what was to come. An uneven affair, but one that neatly bookends a full kd lang collection.

Angel With A Lariat
Sire, 1987

Neither a favourite of lang fans or kd herself, the main drawback of *Angel...* is Dave Edmunds’ somewhat manic production. Only recently did lang reveal that Edmunds was under the influence of coke during the recording, and the overkill layered guitar tracks and reverb-ridden vocals certainly make this album a considerably harder listen. However, lang tried her best and her expressive vocals shine right through the muddled sound.

Reintarnation is released on April 24th via Warner Bros./Rhino and features remastered cuts from her first five albums, plus her first ever single *Friday Dance Promenade*, of which only 500 copies were originally pressed. A previously unreleased song, *Changed My Mind*, is also included.
It would be too easy (and not to mention a bit unfair) to begin and end this review with the statement that this is the best album of 2006, considering that it’s only April. However, Fox Confessor Brings The Flood, the fourth solo studio effort from Neko Case, is easily one of the most anticipated albums of recent months. An ambitious record that’s been two years in the making from concept to glorious finished product, it’s safe to say that it’s been well worth the wait.

With a voice that’s often compared with Patsy Cline, Brenda Lee and Loretta Lynn, Case is clearly getting comfy in the role of the country noir chanteuse. But Case draws on more than these media-driven comparisons, transcending the limitations of genre and forging instead a new style of her own. Strong, resonant and reminiscent of a smoky bar at last call, her rich, luxuriant vocals invoke a walk after midnight, lit only by la lune and heartbeat. And while there are certainly echoes of Cline’s mornful croon on the opening track Margaret vs. Pauline, she just as easily embodies the three-minute, pure pop gold of ‘Mamas’ Michelle Phillips and Cass Elliot on the exquisitely twangy Hold On, Hold On.

The songs on Fox Confessor... are unprecedented illustrations of Case’s superb lyricism and growing skill as a storyteller and poet. Reflective and compliant yet optimistic, the songs weave their way through metaphors and myths. Margaret vs. Pauline sees her weaving words into melodies that at first seem to only illustrate the difference between the two titular women; however, a closer look reveals a flawlessly executed character study full of minute detail — “Ancient strings set feet a light to speed to her such mild grace / no monument of tacky gold / they smoothed her hair with cinnamon waves”.

On the title track, Case completely abandons any notion of standard structure with a beautiful tune that bypasses anything as laughably conventional as a chorus, instead wending its way through an imaginative storyline based on an old Ukrainian folk tale: “Clouds hang on these curves like me / and I kneel to the wheel / of the fox confessor on splendid heels / and he shames me from my seat”.

Another of the standout tracks, Star Witness, weaves a love song into a contemporary country tune, but dipping into the darkness of a Fifties murder ballad telling the grisly story of a lover’s untimely demise: “go on, go on scream and cry / you’re miles from where anyone will find you / this is nothing new, no television crew / they don’t even put on the sirens / my nightgown sweeps the pavement, please”.

Whilst Case is the lyricist and primary songwriter, the many skilled collaborators and guests on this album include Kelly Hogan, Visqueen’s Rachel Flotard, The Band’s Garth Hudson, Joey Burns and John Convertino of Calexico and former Flat Duo Jet Dexter Romweber, not to mention longtime bandmates Jon Rauhouse and Tom V Ray. This diversity of talent is certainly not wasted either. Feedback fills the title track, a reverberating and deep orchestral strength rises in Dirty Knife (a song based on a decidedly un-cosy family story passed down from her grandma) and a lazy surfer backdrop gives a stunning sense of atmosphere to Lion’s Jaws. And when talking about atmosphere, it wouldn’t be right not to mention the haunting gospel tones of John Saw That Number, a traditional folk song with new music added by Case, recorded in the stairwell of Toronto’s Horseshoe Tavern. It’s what spines were really made to tingle for.

Monumentally diverse and damn near impeccable, Fox Confessor Brings The Flood is a tremendous portrait of poetics and storytelling that will surely stand the test of time. Always something of a cult artist out on the fringe of recognition, especially this side of the Atlantic, it could be that Case’s light has finally outgrown the bushel beneath which it has been hidden for so very long.

Loria Near
In the five years since signing to Brit indie label Bella Union, Sara Lov and Dustin O’Halloran have produced two highly-rated albums – *My Beautiful Sinking Ship* (2001) and 2003’s heavenly *The Stars At Saint Andrea* – both of which marked a clear shift away from their earlier, more post-rock oriented self-released efforts.

Calmly melding a smorgasbord of influences, the Dévics were showered with plaudits from critics and fellow musicians alike, partly because of their refusal to easily conform to any particular rulebook. Their commitment to maintain this very special brand of elusiveness led the twosome (sans their formerly full-time members Ed Maxwell and Evan Schnabel) to relocate to a farmhouse hidden deep in rural Italy where they moved into their current lush and wistful sound space, a dreamy and atmospheric terrain with folk-rock influences and frequent overtones of cabaret melancholy.

Third album *Push The Heart* is, emotionally at least, a more straightforward affair than *The Stars At Saint Andrea*. The songs are simpler and more direct, with less emphasis on the smoky, late-night bar ethos that drew sideways comparisons with Portishead, or perhaps Beth Orton-via-Goldfrapp, and more on an overall sense of bittersweet reflection. What the Dévics do share with the likes of Portishead and Goldfrapp is a fine sense of structure and technology-led production in spades. In fact, the production (which by all accounts was a slightly disjointed affair) almost threatens the album’s credibility, but is too carefully stewarded by O’Halloran to really overwhelm; when the melodies are this sweet and Lov’s tender voice even sweeter still, it’s impossible to avoid getting pleasantly lost in some of the loveliest moments, particularly on the album’s central triptych of *Song For A Sleeping Girl*, *Distant Radio* and *Just One Breath* (all of which first appeared on last year’s exquisite *Distant Radio EP*).

Lyrical, the album is accessible and engaging, playful yet plaintive. Lov’s doo-eyed yearnings on album opener *Lie To Me* and the charming *Secret Message To You*, which concerns the futile construction of a boat from too few parts to bring her love back, are inspired and give the songs a depth far beyond her pretty voice. And it would certainly be remiss of me not to point out that it is a very pretty voice indeed, whether she’s singing softly into a mic with her eyes to the floor, or opening up and expanding to cover whatever sonic bed O’Halloran constructs for her. More a request than a gripe, but it would be nice to hear a few more tracks along the lines of the latter in future. O’Halloran’s balanced, reassuring voice adds a warm and comforting counterpoint on just two of the tracks – the aforementioned *Song For A Sleeping Girl* and the also excellent *If We Cannot See*, which comes closer to lighters-aloft anthem territory than anything they’ve done in the past.

The Dévics are unlikely to fill our stadiums just yet though, and in truth I doubt they would want to. But *Push The Heart* can only help their cause and win them new fans looking for something fresh and convincing to see in the spring. More power to them. *Pete Morrow*

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**Dévics**

**Push The Heart**

*Bella Union***

★ ★ ★ ★

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**Hem**

**No Word From Tom**

*Nettwerk***

★ ★ ★½

Some might say that after just two critically acclaimed albums, an experimental collection of covers, live tracks and reworked originals might be a bit of an ego trip. However, when the band in question is Brooklyn-based country-politicans Hem, the idea becomes less self-absorbed and far more provocative. In fact, it becomes downright curious, especially with a casual glancing of the tracklist. Boasting everything from fully orchestrated live tracks to rollicking covers of unexpected independent hits to country standards, *No Word From Tom* is certainly rarer than either of its predecessors. Much of the band’s appeal and undoubtedly their strongest asset lies in the voice of Sally Ellyson, and both the a capella version of traditional standard *All The Pretty Horses* and their gorgeous cover of Tony Joe White’s *Rainy Night In Georgia* wisely capitalise on this. What’s more, they showcase the very sort of song that Hem has made their signature; forlorn and longing, yet subtle and flowing, they start things off with vigour and promise.

But Hem don’t just dawdle along routes they’ve already travelled. To show they’ve been busy trying new things, they throw in some contemporary covers to keep the flow interesting and to showcase Ellyson’s wider range where a typical Hem song would keep it close. Nowhere is this more evident than in the acoustic rendition of *Fountains Of Wayne’s Radiation Vibe*. Whilst theirs isn’t nearly as funky as the original, Hem gamely jam along, giving the song a little more depth and feeling than even Chris Collingwood could muster. The live tracks, too, shine brightly. Ellyson’s vocals soar above the music as it colours the gaps behind her, seemingly formed by alchemical reaction. The sound is full and resonant, losing little of the detail of their studio counterparts and proving that Hem are just as solid an outfit outside of the studio as they are magical within it.

However, the album doesn’t always gel as well as either *Rabbit Songs* (2001) or *Eveningland* (2005). The addition of REM’s *South Central Rain* works as an interesting interpretation of the band’s early classic, but for once the signature slo-core vocals detract from rather than add to the song. The same is true with many of the reworked originals. For instance, *Eveningland* has swelled to twice its original length, and although it works on its own, the original did the job so succinctly that you can’t help but feel they are needlessly stretching out something that worked just fine the way it was. As the album goes on... and on... and on, for just under an hour, it’s hard to escape the notion that Hem are reaching for something that they never quite grasp, a feeling of earnestness that just isn’t resolved by the time it draws to close.

Perhaps *No Word From Tom* would have worked better as either an entire album of covers or an entire album of live performances. As it is, this will do more to entertain longtime fans than generate new ones, and the band just don’t play long enough with new ideas to break any ground. Nevertheless, they continue to grow and shine as a band on the up, and whilst this latest release may be quietly indulgent, who’s to say that a band as good as Hem don’t deserve that opportunity. *Loria Near*
If one thing sets the Dresden Dolls apart from pretty much anyone else around right now, it’s their confrontational and discomforting honesty. It’s something they practice in life as well as in their music – the blogs Amanda Palmer posts online dissect her insecurities and anxieties in detail. Take this for example: “i prefer sleeping alone nowadays. i barely think about love. i have plenty. i haven’t had a boyfriend in so long i’ve forgotten what it’s like. honestly.” The band also publish the wonderfully inarticulate hate-mail they receive on their site (sample: “could you please do something like kill yourselves, before you come to toronto, seeing you would probably ruin my life” – spelling mistakes author’s own – or “if you ever come to atlanta call me up 678-XXX-XXXX and i’ll fuckin beat your ass”) as well as collecting together some of the savage and abusive reviews they’ve received.

It’s this honesty that makes their music so entirely compelling, and Yes, Virginia – the follow-up to their 2004 self-titled debut – makes for truly startling listening. Building upon the dark themes and manic yet melodic style of their debut, it represents an artistic progression on every level – musically, lyrically and vocally. Palmer has extended her vocal range to incorporate a whole new palate of sounds, and, in places, sounds more aggressive than ever before. The songs are powerful and muscular, tempered with moments of tenderness made all the more affecting by the tempestuous menace that surrounds them. The Dolls have grown more confident, too, adding layer upon layer of insistent, pounding pianos and cascading drums to create a driving and sometimes frantic sound.

The insistent piano riff that opens the record is extremely ominous – like listening to the first rumbling tones of a coming thunderstorm – and it’s not long before a shout from Amanda heralds the entrance of Brian Viglione’s pummelling drums. Songs turn from tender to vicious in the space of a couple of lines. Delilah, one of the album’s highlights, describes the frustration of watching a friend wilfully enter a violent relationship: “He’s gonna beat you like a pillow / you schizos never learn / and if you take him home / you’ll get what you deserve”. From a hushed, piano and vocal opening, the song builds until the frustration and powerlessness in the lyrics is reflected in the epic, operatic music. Lyrically, the album is often violent and disturbing, with images of mutilation and surgery recurring throughout without ever sounding like they’re merely out to shock. Perhaps this is because Palmer’s writing is shot through with dark humour and a rare wit. Shores Of California, for example, is a clever dissection of male and female coping mechanisms for being single, with lyrics like “all i know is that all around the nation / the girls are crying, the boys are masturbating”.

There are occasional moments where the lyrics veer close to self-parody, but the Dolls are too knowing and self-aware to succumb to such pitfalls: on Dirty Business, Amanda sings “Am I the poster girl for some suburban sickness?” while the unmitigated stream of aggression running through the chorus of Backstabber (“Backstabber, backstabber / greedy fucking fit-haver”) would seem ridiculously emo were the lyrics not married to the catchiest melody the band have ever penned. Furthermore, the song ends with a demented cackle as if to tell you the band know exactly how closely they’ve been flirting with the ridiculous.

Yes, Virginia is not an easy listen, but it’s an exciting, raw and emotional one. However you might categorise the Dresden Dolls – and they have been variously labelled as theatrical rock, punk cabaret, manic-musical, neo-glamb-torch etc. – one fact remains: their music is really damn good.

**Danny Weddup**
Just a few bars into *Brother, Grab That Gun*’s commanding introduction, and you’re hit by an effects-drenched chord progression straight out of an early, danceable Cure track. So it’s no surprise that Canadian quintet The Organ are being bombarded with comparisons, and not just to Robert Smith’s enduring misfits. In recent years the New Wave revival has been inescapable, with the likes of Interpol, Hot Hot Heat and The Rapture apeing early goth to the point of making you want to go to dark clubs just to stand in the corners and stare at your plimsolls. So are The Organ late to the party?

No is the answer, and for two good reasons. The first is that *Grab That Gun* was released in North America back in November 2004 and is inexplicably only just bursting out of the stall over here. The second is that it’s not really a case of being late *per se*. The Organ don’t so much look back at the Eighties than hop into a time machine and make believe that everything post-1983 hasn’t ever actually happened. It’s a powerhouse approach to pastiche, with taut songs of longing, daydreaming and disconnection carried along on a wave of jangly guitar work. The melodies are instantly Cure-like, but trip appealingly all over the place as if Johnny Marr had fallen downstairs trying to do up his shoelaces.

And The Smiths comparisons don’t stop there; lead singer Katie Sketch is, vocally at least, a dead ringer for a female Morrissey, to the point that the observation seems so obvious as to be trite. Then there’s the trademark deadpan song titles like *No One Has Ever Looked So Dead* and *I Am Not Surprised*. But what Sketch has over a hundred inferior Smiths tribute bands is the ability to make every vocal sound like she’s reaching for something she can never quite get to. It’s dour, yes, but totally intoxicating. They come a little undone on songs like *Basement Band Song* where repetition starts to creep in, but beyond that it’s a difficult album to find any fault with. A lot of these songs have been lifted and re-recorded from their 2002 debut EP, *Sinking Hearts*, and with good reason. Last year’s excellent single, *Memorize The City*, is an obvious highlight, with its delayed guitars and an urgency that sends Sketch’s vocals scurrying around a handsomely infectious hook.

It’s great to see an all-female indie band that isn’t pelting the emo or goth rock scene with cleavage. Katie Sketch is delightfully androgynous and the songs are rather less likely to have you reaching for the razor blades than they are to send you deep into the New Forest to re-examine your entire existence. These songs are no mere accompaniment to a look. The Organ are touring this spring. You’d be a fool to miss them, though I feel slightly sorry that they’re going to have to tout four year old songs for the benefit of us Brits. Don’t forget to clap your heads even harder. Girls Aloud this ain’t.

*Ian Buchan*
HK119  
HK119  
One Little Indian  
★★★★

In comparison with its Nordic neighbours, Finland has been far better known for its classical endeavours than its out-and-out joyous pop. Aside from a few question able rock exports like The Rasmus and Nightwish, the most successful Finnish music in the international arena has been limited to opera and the works of Jean Sibelius, whose enduring symphonies continue to be played at proms across the world. Given the huge amounts of government funding into music tuition for the youth, it seems strange that the country has yet to produce a significant pop crossover act, but perhaps they could never really compete with the likes of ABBA from next-door Sweden. As a half-Finn, I’ve often despised about this, and most fellow Finns agree. How thoroughly refreshing, then, to discover a truly original and exciting artist originating from Finland in the form of Heidi Kilpelainen, or rather her alter ego, HK119.

Putting her MA in Fine Art from Central St. Martin’s College in London to excellent use, Kilpelainen has created an all-encompassing performance art persona in HK119, and she’s not shy about utilising the entire spectrum of the art world to get across her message. Not content with simply writing, recording and producing the album herself, she’s recorded her own surreal living-sculpture videos to accompany the songs and put together a dramatic stage act involving a catsuit and helium balloons, beguiling audiences with bizarre special effects. She’s a powerful Nordic force, a beautiful blonde Amazonian monolith, simultaneously furious and fixated with modern technology.

But what of the album? HK119 is packed full of songs that act as a series of short statements (most are less than three minutes long) on the modern human condition, each taking an element of post-millennial society and pushing it to the extreme. What if we never put down our mobile phones? What if everything we said could be censored? What if commercialism was so prevalent that all you cared about was buying and selling? HK119’s world is one in which people have ultimately sacrificed humanity for consumerism. It may seem ludicrous, and in a way it’s meant to be, but it’s not a completely alien concept, and given that she’s come from the country that innovated the mobile phone to the enormous bustling city of London, it’s not hard to understand Kilpelainen’s motivation for exploring these ideas.

The music itself is hard and rough; raw electronic beats are blended with rough industrial synths, samples and HK119’s soaring and demanding vocals. But most of all, it’s just great fun. HK119 may be best friends with Alison Goldfrapp, but her album is much more vibrant and challenging than the oddly dispiriting and bland Supernature (2005). There’s also some inventive audience participation; not only is there a hidden track, 11th ID, buried somewhere in the album just waiting to be found and remixed for a competition, but if you call up the number read out in first single Pick Me Up, you may be amused and bemused in equal measure. In fact, HK119 makes almost any music from the electronic genre seem weak and ineffective.

But comparing Kilpelainen’s creation to anyone else is difficult, by virtue of her sheer uniqueness. People have tried Grace Jones, or Ziggy-era Bowie, but mostly because of her appearance and bizarre, slightly alien character. Also, Björk is reportedly a fan. As is often the case with artists of such originality, it only seems possible to liken her to others that are one-of-a-kind. HK119 is an artist for the future.

Thrillingly vibrant masterstroke of artistry, and what’s more, she’s fun to boot. At last, we have a Finnish artist who’s a keeper. Heidi, pidän työstänne!

Bryn Williams

Pretty Girls  
Make Graves  
Élan Vital  
Matador  
★★★

Three years on from their critically acclaimed second album, The New Romance, Pretty Girls Make Graves return with an altered line-up — out with guitarist Nathan Thelan; in with keyboard player Leona Marrs, formerly of Hint Hint — and with lead singer Andrea Zollo still recovering from the vocal nodules she suffered after touring their debut Good Health (2002). The result is Elan Vital, but for all the enthusiastic vigour and liveliness suggested by the title, rarely does such spirit manifest itself in the album. First three tracks The Nocturnal House, Pyrite Pedestal and The Number are all good but not quite perfect. On Pyrite Pedestal, PGMG sound more like a polished high-school rock band than the punk-rock revivalists they’re often hailed as. On the positive side, it is catchy, it is upbeat and it does feature fantastic vocal arrangements. Unfortunately, the rather pedestrian lyrics of this and The Number don’t help either, “I guess these days I’m someone else” being a particularly cringeworthy example.

Things pick up with the next track through; Parade is easily the album standout — a gorgeously rousing, retro workman’s song with soaring harmonies, where the addition of Marrs is really felt. It’s perfect mixtape fodder! The following track, Domino, is also strong but sadly it’s all downhill from there. Songs that start off promisingly, like the atmospheric Pearls On A Plate, go on to display little variation and are ultimately a bit disappointing. See also Pictures Of A Night Scene, on which the boys take the lead, and the Sons & Daughters-esque Selling The Wind, both of which are slightly lacklustre but not terrible.

Penultimate track Wildcat is something of an improvement and is strangely evocative of mid-Nineties house parties, but it’s followed up with the ironically titled and less than enlumoung Bullet Charm. A sense of striving for incitement runs through the album, meeting with mixed success along the way, and with two songs about workers disputes alone, I wouldn’t mind betting that the band watched a bit too much of Brassed Off or North County during the recording.

So while Zollo’s post-op voice is clear and engaging, and notwithstanding the good hooks throughout, Elan Vital sounds on the whole like the kind of thing you might expect to hear on a teenage rom-com soundtrack, complete with lyrics that are consistently banal and sometimes even criminal. It’s not necessarily a disaster, but it is less than we music fans have come to expect from a band that were once so exciting. Lynn Roberts
Hayley Hutchinson
Independently Blue Gut
★ ★ ★ ★

For all her roots in the best of Britishness, the musical landscape of Yorkshire lass Hayley Hutchinson’s debut album is less the hills and dales of North England than the prairies of North America. Hailing from an established musical lineage (her dad was instrumental in David Bowie’s early success), Hutchinson clearly knows where a smidgen of ambition can take you. Though self-financed and locally recorded, Independently Blue nevertheless belies its humble origins, turning the financial limitations of the project into a solid gold advantage. Mostly recorded live in the studio by Hutchinson and her band’s core members (which include Chris Helme and Trevor Raggatt), the result is a cohesive little package boasting real energy. Certainly, it’s no cheap imitation.

Or is it? Logically, Independently Blue ought to be filed under D for derivative since, stylistically at least, it effortlessly cribs from the back catalogues of Sheryl Crow and Nanci Griffith. In the end though, it’s too strong an album to be so easily dismissed, and richly deserves its four-star rating. Within just a few perfunctory listens, Hutchinson’s strong writing and excellent vocal style – pure but blessed with a richness and bluesy edge that’s easy on the ear – commands the listener’s attention. First single, Here’s The Love, is a joyful slice of Crow-esque pop in which keyboard and sparse but well-utilised electric guitar motifs weave a likeable confection around an acoustic centre and country-tinged harmonies. Other songs on the album find Hutchinson in Globe Sessions-style open-tuning mode, complete with droning strings and bluesy slide guitar. Elsewhere, Climb Through could be a slightly updated outtake from one of Nanci Griffith’s early MCA albums, with its gentle capo’d acoustics and high harmony singing. Even the cello part echoes John Catching’s playing on some of Griffith’s best work, while the bluegrass-tinged title track also bears the Texan’s influence. Minor Key shifts things a little more in the direction of Griffith’s first “pop” album, Storms, with Telecaster licks very reminiscent of guitar supremo Jerry Donahue.

Ironically, the most problematic song on the album is also one of the strongest, Deadman, which was released as a download-only single in December 2005, is strikingly similar to Sheryl Crow’s massive chart breakthrough hit, All I Wanna Do. The rhythms, tone, handclaps, guitar stabs and other ornamentation are so close it’s almost spooky. Normally, this would sound the copycat death knell to a song, but Deadman is just too darned strong. Indeed, all things considered, Independently Blue is a statement of intent that richly deserves the plaudits it has thus far gained, and is particularly excellent for a debut. If Hutchinson can synthesise her influences into a more individual signature on future albums, who knows, she could be the one to show Nashville’s best how it really should be done.

Trevor Raggatt

Dolly Parton
Those Were The Days
Liberty
★

Oh dear. Just when it was all going so right for Dolly Parton, she’s lost her footing in the farmyard and recorded this insipid collection of bluegrass-inflected covers of songs from the Sixties and Seventies. And while it probably seemed like a good idea to rope in original artists where possible, seasoned with more contemporary singers where not; it really, really wasn’t. Not since 1996’s Treasures has she seemed so uninspired – a not entirely coincidental link, as that too was an all-covers album over-egged by an all-star cast. But before I go on, I must confess that daring to aim criticism at the Dolly of immortal legend just makes me feel mean and seedy, low down and dirty. But having tried to come to terms with this album, it’s down to the gutter I go and I’ll have my meths straight up.

Parton is, of course, famous for insisting that she ain’t no dumb blonde, which is almost certainly true, but she’s woefully misjudged this gut-wrenching cash cow. Where her trio of albums from 1999’s The Grass Is Blue to 2002’s Halos & Horns were packed with nicely nuanced, if faintly smarmy bluegrass ballads, Those Were The Days heaps on the saccharine by the noxious, suffocating bucketload. Worse still, some of the gaps in between the songs are filled with gawking Barbie-esque studio outtakes of Parton bantering with her vast array of fellow duettists, who include Lee Ann Womack, Judy Collins, Norah Jones, Nickle Creek, Alison Krauss, Mindy Smith, Kris Kristofferson, Joe Nichols and Keith Urban.

As far as the songs go, Crimson & Clover is quite nice, and Blowin’ In The Wind is, well, breezy I guess. But Me & Bobby McGee is turgid and I know Cat Stevens isn’t real big in Texas these days, but Dolly’s Where Do The Children Play is really something else, despite Yusuf himself chiming in on guitar. There’s even a Turn Turn Turn for the crystal meth generation, while every trace of pathos in Joni Mitchell’s Both Sides Now is mercilessly throttled by a high-speed banjo workout so inanely cheerful, it’s what an aerobics class in Hell must sound like. And seeing as that’s exactly where I’m headed after writing this review, I might as well finish the bottle. James Gurney
Despite the lazy comparisons that journalists often make – “She’s got red hair, she must be the new Tori Amos!” – the songs of Regina Spektor sound like no-one else on Earth. This is conclusively proven by this new compilation, which collects together selected tracks from her three previous albums under one overarching theme. *Mary Ann Meets The Gravediggers...* privileges Spektor’s narrative-driven songs, which are conveniently often the strongest cuts on her albums. Many of them have a literary lyrical bent, making reference to Greek tragedies (*Oedipus*) and Hans Christian Anderson (*Prisoners*), alongside sparkling stories of her own creation. The cast of characters is eclectic and colourful, but not all of the songs feature fictional constructions – Spektor is not afraid to place herself centre-stage.

On a sonic level, the record is striking: Regina has a playful attitude to words and a clearly apparent delight in their sound, or rather the unusual sounds she can draw out of them. This is evident throughout, but most of all on *Consequence Of Sounds*. The lyrics directly contradict the melodic stream that leaps from Spektor’s mouth. So while the song begins “My rhyme ain’t good just yet / My brain and tongue just met” and goes on to discuss the problems caused by consonants and vowels, every line is delivered with stunning verbal dexterity. Furthermore, many of her songs are punctuated by bursts of foreign language and surprising sounds that play a part in their respective narratives – a sneeze on *Mary Ann*, hawking spittle on *Daniel Cowman*. Regularly swooping from pop to rap to jazz stylings, often in the space of two lines, Spektor displays an inventiveness that sets her way above the majority of her peers. But one comparison does stand true; the energy and elasticity of her vocals are reminiscent of Ani DiFranco’s riotous live shows.

What this collection also proves is that Spektor can communicate whimsical humour (*Love Affair, Sailor Song*) and affecting tragedy with equal skill. *Daniel Cowman* (“a man destined to hang, a man destined to fry”) is about a death row inmate’s desire to take a final bath before his execution. *Chemo Limo* is the album’s most lyrically complex and brilliant song. It presents us with the dream narrative of a mother diagnosed with cancer, her anxieties about dying and leaving her children behind revealed through the coded images thrown up in her dream. In the lyrics “I had a dream: crispy crispy Benjamin Franklin came over and baby-sat all four of my kids”, her financial concerns and worries about the welfare of her children are conflated with the precision and economy that characterises the best poetry. Meanwhile, the character’s outrage at the financial burden of paying for chemotherapy is expressed in the song’s impassioned chorus: “I can afford chemo like I can afford a limo and on any given day I’d rather ride a limousine.”

The album culminates with recent single, *Us*, a dramatic, stormy number that finally began to attract the sort of press and radio attention that Spektor more than warrants. She is an artist who improves with each release – the finest songs here are taken from 2004’s *Soviet Kitsch* – and she has already completed her next album, scheduled for release later this year. With that in mind, it looks increasingly likely that 2006 will be the year in which Regina Spektor Meets Chart Success & The Acclaim That She Deserves.

*Danny Weddup*
Probably the first thing you’ll notice with this album, perhaps with a pang of initial apprehension, are the two neatly accessorised yet slightly sinister characters loitering in the background on the Shining-esque sleeve. Say hello to The Watson Twins, with whom the moonlighting Rilo Kiley frontwoman Jenny Lewis generously shares the credit for Rabbit Fur Coat. It’s surprising really, for though they are ever-present in the mix and undoubtedly talented, the Twins are essentially only backing singers to Lewis’s distinctive vocals. The unrivalled star of the show, she drifts, snarls and soars her way through witty and occasionally uncomfortable lyrics, leaving the Watsons to fill in the gaps wherever they can. Even the instrumentation is kept to a minimum, in keeping with the highly personal manner in which Lewis wrote these songs. Supposedly recorded in six days flat, Rabbit Fur Coat is intended as a tribute to Lewis’s relationship with her mother and Mrs Lewis’s favourite singer, Laura Nyro — specifically the 1971 Nyro/LaBelle collaboration, Gonna Take A Miracle. That’s quite an ambition, but luckily Lewis boasts a sensational resume that proves she possesses more than enough countrified white soul to carry it off, and there are touching moments aplenty.

Take the gospel/bluegrass opener Run Devil Run, for instance, a short a cappella vocal workout in which Lewis immediately gives the Watsons a run for their money. While the lush harmonies contained therein is surely what the Twins were hired for, a few songs down the line they soon start to grate a little, popping up unawares to embellish a chorus or three in their rather dated style (occasionally reminiscent of Mary Ford’s multi-tracked crooning on 1950s Les Paul records). Luckily, no amount of excessive cooing can entirely distract from Lewis’s expressive and compelling vocals, and the talents of the Twins admittedly compliment these well, teasing out and reinforcing the melodic subtleties throughout, no matter how occasionally mawkish. No better is this demonstrated than on You Are What You Love (“not what loves you back”), an exuberant, wholesome pop confection that you can practically taste. Twinkling keyboards, a shuffling rhythm and an addictively relentless chorus all combine perfectly, rounded off with possibly the most satisfying ending imaginable in a culture of lazy fadeouts and over-indulgence.

Also rather incredible are the seductive first single Rise Up With Fists! and the title track, the first of the twelve to be written. Lewis’s echoey voice is accompanied only by a tentatively plucked acoustic guitar, creating the impression of eavesdropping as she strums alone onstage, long after her audience and band has gone home. Rabbit Fur Coat is the undisputed centerpiece of the record, best exemplifying Lewis’s sugar-sweet singing (thankfully shed of Watson warblings in this case). It’s a crafty little number, however; the nursery rhyme simplicity of the melody belies a chilling fable of how a cursed garment takes a family from rags to riches to rags again — a metaphor that, according to Lewis, runs throughout the album.

A cover of Eighties OAP supergroup The Travelling Wilburys’ Handle With Care makes for a dramatic change of pace and reveals itself to be a delightful surprise. The benefits of being one of the most well-connected women in the business are clearly laid out, with Death Cab For Cutie/The Postal Service’s Ben Gibbard contributing a chiming twelve-string guitar and Roy Orbison’s parts, co-producer M. Ward doing Jeff Lynne and Conor Oberst of Bright Eyes croaking his way through the Dylan lines. Elsewhere, Lewis’s boyfriend Johnathan Rice and Saddle Creek producer extraordinaire Mike Mogis are among the sixteen-strong player count.

Overall, Rabbit Fur Coat is a captivating, delightful and reassuring album that, although it lacks some of Rilo Kiley’s broad scope and musical versatility, offers an endearing glimpse into the heart and mind of a very special talent. The world should know about Jenny Lewis. Spread the word. Alex Doak
Tina Dico
In The Red
Finest Gramophone ★★★

You can’t deny the popularity of Tina Dico in her homeland of Denmark. When the domestic version of In The Red hit the streets last July, it slotted in at the top of the charts, outselling the likes of Coldplay and U2. Dico (or Dickow if you’re Danish) herself was up for consideration in three categories at the 2006 Danish Music Awards; but is “big in Copenhagen” like “big in Japan” or can she cut it in the crowded international pop market? Though she’s better known in the UK as a vocalist for chillout maestros Zero 7, she no doubt hopes that In The Red will bring her recognition in her own right. Certainly, the overall impression of the album is of a perfectly respectable piece of Scando-pop, with darker, more brooding overtones than the likes of Norway’s Lene Marlin or Sweden’s Sophie Zelmani. But the sticking point here is a noticeable lack of spark to elevate the songs above the realms of the mundane.

Credit where it’s due though — the production is excellent. Chris Potter, who’s better known for his work on the Verve’s Urban Hymns (1997), clearly knows his way around a mixing desk and, comparing the UK release with the Danish original, it seems that some additional remixing has been done over the autumn to prepare for its wider release. The songs are skilfully layered with lush samples, strings and orchestral instrumentation, all adding up to a luxuriant aural vista. Dico’s voice is strong and carries the melodies well, sometimes cracking attractively on the quieter, more emotional sections. Again, nothing to fault here, and when aligned with better material it makes for an effective mix. There’s no doubt that there is a good deal of talent here, although Dico’s Gen-X couldn’t-care-less delivery occasionally grates, particularly on the otherwise enjoyable Nobody’s Man. Likewise, the title track slips beneath the surface from languorous to simply dragging its heels and Use Me seems just a little too ponderous.

Perhaps the most disappointing thing is that there are some excellent songs scattered among the album’s more average fare. Had all the tracks been of the same standard, In The Red would be a significantly more involving album. Losing sets the disc off to an encouraging start with its big Beatlesque choruses evoking Tears For Fears in Sowing The Seeds Of Love mode (in a good way!). Give In rolls along smoothly like a chilled out drivetime classic, while first single Warm Sand is the clear standout with its moody, building verses and hummable yet majestic refrain and Room With A View sets a gentle acoustic mood, enfolding the listener in a melancholy reverie. In the end though, this is a candidate for selective downloading. At least that way you’ll be left in the black rather than overdrawn.

Trevor Raggatt

Stephanie Kirkham
Sunlight On My Soul SLK ★★★½

Stephanie Kirkham must have thought that Lady Fate herself was smiling down when she signed a five-album deal with Verve imprint, Hut Records. But the label’s implosion just a few months later proved how fickle that Lady can be. Undeterred, Kirkham returned to the day job and nearly three years on from her disarming debut That Girl, Sunlight On My Soul arrives on Kirkham’s own label and shows that determination and dedication against the odds can reap real dividends — in this case, a quirky collection of songs that resolutely refuse to be easily classified, instead rewarding the more determined listener.

Opener Butterfly Song is a charmingly twee prelude on the fragile and fleeting nature of life, and tempting as it is to knowingly smile and place her in the Vashti Bunyan camp of delicate folksters, Kirkham refuses to be tied down so easily. Certainly, her voice still retains that winning fragility and innocence — cute and coquettish without becoming fey; winsome without cartoonish tendencies; light and delicate but still imbued with strength.

Where Butterfly Song does clue you in though is in its use of two characteristic devices that Kirkham scatters throughout the album — unison vocal/backing instrument melodies and playing around with the rhythm and tempo of the songs. Here, they work well but they do get a little distracting on their umpteenth occurrence.

Recent single Show Me What You’re Made Of is a lithe, feline jazz number with a walking bass and mood that deftly lands (on its feet, of course) somewhere between stray and aristocrat. It’s a trick rather less successfully attempted on January Day, with its halting changes in rhythm and horn section that’s less like Coltrane than a bargain basement Casio tone.

Hear The Blackbird and All For Nothing are open, folksy songs; the former boasting a sweet nursery rhyme simplicity and the latter a feast of beguiling backing vocals. But the centrepiece of the record is a trio of songs that mine the rich seam of Seventies Celtic folk for inspiration. Taking as their template bands like Planxty and Moving Hearts, who fused Arabic-styled melodies with traditional European instruments like the bouzouki, hurdy-gurdy and bodhran, Bad Dream, Today and Bonds Are Broken are nicely atmospheric. Even the fact that Bad Dream’s virtually a capella opening sounds a bit like the Shangri-La’s Leader Of The Pack does not prove too much of a distraction. Elsewhere, Moving & Breathing sounds a bit like Nanci Griffith, which is never a bad thing.

Then there’s the title track, rounding out the album with a bang instead of a whisper, a bizarre mélange of sounds that somehow successfully melds together each of the album’s themes and influences. To describe it to is to think of a strange Frankenstein experiment bolting together leftover scraps of sessions from Joni Mitchell, Las Ketchup and, quite possibly, next year’s Turkish Eurovision entry, while Kirkham stands at the centre triumphantly yelling “IT’S ALIVE! IT’S ALIVE!” Fortunately, it’s no fearsome hideous monster; what could have been a disastrous trainwreck of a track in less capable hands provides instead a gloriously luminous and uplifting close to this worthy second effort.

Trevor Raggatt
There is a rule and a paradox that has existed since melody was first used to communicate emotion. The rule: that classic songs tend to deal in the darker elements of life. The paradox: that, for a dark song, someone somewhere has to suffer. Music can heal the deepest wounds and turn the bitterness of lost love into the rose-tinted hue of fond memory. Experts in the art of songwriting continue to educate us and we never tire of the lesson. In just over a year, Cash lost her father, mother and stepmother, leaving her the bearer of a 50-year old torch and the Carter-Cash family (who, to some, were the American family) in tatters. You're unlikely to see again a dedication carrying the weight and legacy of a musical dynasty as popular and critically acclaimed as the one Cash has printed on the sleeve of Black Cadillac.

With the very stuff of life and death at her fingertips then, it was natural that the follow-up to 2003's Rules Of Travel would be both a personal goodbye and a meditation on loss. The music at the wake occasionally makes for painful listening. That Cash hasn't resorted to primal scream therapy, but instead maintained her impeccable reputation for clever, insightful wordplay and gorgeous melody, is to her credit and our gain. Black Cadillac leaves its listeners in conflict with themselves; you sing along, until you remember what it is you're singing.

The highlights are many. Throughout I Was Watching You, the album's recurring themes of loss and love run like a raw nerve through a simple, layered, piano-driven melody, at once ghostly and viscerally tangible, personal yet universal. Like Fugitives comes on like Bryan Adams' Run To You without the Eighties bombast or formulaic, lightewing middle-eight. Instead, it's the bitterest lyrical pill in Cash's medicine cabinet: "It's a strange world we live in where the church leads you to Hell, and the lawyers get the money for the lives they divide and sell". Elsewhere, the title track rolls in on an earthquake-like bass riff, not unlike her father's voice talking beneath a stolen U2 guitar part, while Radio Operator's poignant message simply "...will not end."

The overall tone is one of sadness, but never defeat. For every heartbreak, there is acceptance that life continues. Implicit in the journey is hope, expressed beautifully in another standout, God Is In The Roses, in which Cash takes a deep breath and smiles ruefully whilst singing "My whole world fits inside the moment I saw you re-born, God is in the roses... and the thorns". For twenty years now, Rosanne Cash has created an exquisite blend of country, pop and rock that tends to get overlooked in the final reckoning, but remains one of the cognoscenti's best-kept secrets. With Black Cadillac, she has triumphed; it's a masterclass in living with the paradox, providing more of life's truths, and laying to rest with dignity and beauty some of her troubles. Buy it. Empathise. Feel better. Paul Woodgate

Karen Matheson
Downriver
Vertical

Since founding Capercaillie with her now husband Donald Shaw at the dawn of the Eighties, Karen Matheson has become one of the foundational voices of modern Scottish folk. Among her many accolades, US magazine Billboard have hailed her as "the finest Gaelic singer alive today" and Sean Connery swears she has "a throat like a Fine Gaelic singer alive today" and Sean Connery swears she has "a throat like a blockquote.\n
In the Dark is a writer's lament for all those songs that never find an audience, while I Will Not Wear The Willow boasts an interesting twist on the murder ballad. Written from a woman's perspective, the lyrics slowly reveal why the singer will not mourn with the other village women for her seemingly abandoned lover, until the final chilling realisation that she knows where she buried the body. Cruach Na Bpaiste, written by Irish author Brendan Graham for his 2005 novel The Brightest Day, The Darkest Night, draws proceedings to a sombre close with Michael McGoldrick's uilleann pipes joining the lament with Matheson's heartbreaking voice. And then, inevitably, we're returned to our own less luminous world, grateful for the time that's gone by. Trevor Raggatt
Chances are you won’t have easily forgotten the cacophony known as the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, a triumvirate of college friends who really made a name for themselves in 2003 with a debut album that shifted half a million copies. And before you even had time to ask whether Karen O’s outfits were Betsey Johnson vampy chic or thrift-shop ghetto fabulous (or, more importantly, where you could score those threads), O and co. were centre stage in Central Park with some 3,000 spectators stupefied by their noisy charisma. The music was atypical, vociferous and assertive; the singer a captivating, fashionably iconoclastic wide-eyed post-punk queen. Critics swooned en masse, saving their sweetest praise for the single *Maps*, a cooing, ballad-esque love song where heavily distorted guitar riffs met with O’s vulnerable and softly echoing vocal.

It’s no surprise then that the band had some anxieties about the follow-up, fearing a carbon copy could signal their demise. “It would be pretentious if we did the same thing twice,” said O in an interview with *The Times*. “We knew we didn’t want the same sound or musical paradigm.” And sure enough, *Show Your Bones* is largely divergent from their clamorous debut, and in many ways even its polar opposite. Sonorous melodies and acoustic guitar are the most apparent change, while O herself reveals more than just a lyrical maturation, no longer loudly howling unashamed but actually singing.

Despite this stylistic overhaul, fans should still appreciate the heavily distorted, growling guitar riffs regularly alternated with fun, and sometimes sombre, reverb-drenched guitar picking. *Cheated Hearts* is a light and catchy number that starts out in a delightfully poppy vein before arriving at an apex of robust electrifying riffs and O’s insistence, “I think that I’m bigger than the sound,” while the resplendently mellow acoustics and haunting minor chords of *Turn Into* are attested to by Nick Zinner’s beautifully spooky oscillating solo. Elsewhere, *Way Out* alternates between simple, pretty acoustics and raucous electric guitar; the heavy metallic riffs and aggressive thunderous drums of the bridge relieving what could have otherwise been a potentially flat and repetitious song.

But the best songs here are *Dudley* and *Phenomena*; the former full of melody, lullabic verses and pleasantly rudimentary choruses filled with reverberating notes that compliment the delicate vocal as O ruminates on love (“I lost all reason from playing your games.../ Can love really steer us?”), while the latter must be the embodiment of whatever O meant when she said “*Show Your Bones* is what happens when you put your finger in a light socket”, aside from a killer 240-volt shock, of course. Perhaps the most exuberant and fragmented song of the album, *Phenomena* offers bizarre spaceshhip synth sounds mixed with classic heavy-duty rock ‘n’ roll riffs with a chorus that borrows the Grandmaster Flash line “Something like a phenomenon” and comically transmutes it to “Something like an astronomer”.

There are duff tracks too; *Honeybear*, for example, is rather monotonous and dry, falling consistently short in its attempts to be fun, while the pace of *The Sweets* is slightly too slow to match the momentum of the rest of the album. There’s no question, however, that the Yeah Yeah Yeahs have achieved what they intended — to record a follow-up that borrows the excitement, energy and rawness of *Fever To Tell* and top that with a touch of grown-up sophistication. *Show Your Bones* is ultimately optimistic; the sound of a band who might just have found their niche, somewhere a little further away from art-party cooler-than-thoulessness and a little closer to unassum ing accessibility. *Lisa Komorowska*
First impressions? That Lou Rhodes (formerly 50% of Lamb) has joined the burgeoning underground army of waifs armed with an acoustic guitar, a penchant for Martha's Harbour-era self-sufficiency and a Joni fixation. Listening through for the first time, I could almost smell the cherrywood fires and see Crosby, Stills & Young harmonising over the barbecue. On the surface, *Beloved One* has all the hallmarks of being nice, safe and harmless. In fact, (whisper it) maybe even bland.

Fortunately, it just goes to show how a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. Don't be fooled by the 'back to the woods' manifesto — the 'Good Life'-cum-Amish lifestyle extolled in the (very nice) packaging and homemade art of the booklet are slightly at odds with the warmth, quality and expanse of the recording. The production is exemplary; the instrument separation is balanced and the vocals pushed to the fore. This isn't Old Ma Rhodes whiling away a harsh winter in the Appalachians with a beat-up acoustic, but a gifted songwriter, numerous musician friends, four recording studios, a plethora of organic instruments and the adventure of creative release from her previous band's lo-fi format.

Dig a little and there is plenty of musical invention and personal freedom to be found. Rhodes' sentiments have a disarming honesty that's displayed in each song, let down only by a tendency to rely on lyrical cliché — "Don't underestimate simplicity", "Try to live each day by day", "Feel each moment new" — and those are all from the very first song. More follow, equally subtle. But while they don't stop coming, neither do they ruin the show. There are hooks too — the heartbeat rhythm of *Each Moment Now*, the drowsy double bass underpinning *In'lakesh* and *Treat Her Gently*’s staccato guitar and slowly evolving strings. In the title track, a hesitant beginning gives way to urgent, driven violin and intermittent passages of pastoral flute. Each song builds on the previous one, the sum of the whole distancing itself from individual moments that casual listeners could be forgiven for thinking bear too many similarities. The best is saved for last with *Why*. Although more conventional in its structure than the rest of the album, it’s oozes loveliness. All the first-rate ideas and melodies coalesce into a statement where the simplicity of theme and craft finally hit home. Interestingly, it’s the only song where Rhodes shares a writing credit.

A clarion call for reducing the complexities that surround us, *Beloved One* rewards continued listening and a reflective mind. By combining the DIY ethos of the Seventies folkies with 21st Century production values, it just about hits the spot. Thank goodness for second impressions; this Lamb isn’t lying down, just resting. **Paul Woodgate**

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**Joan As Police Woman**

With the release of her debut solo EP, it’s finally time for Joan Wasser to, to quote one of her own song titles, “stagger into the light”, assume centre stage and take the spotlight. For the past few years, she’s been an integral part of Rufus Wainwright’s touring band and also found time to play on Antony & The Johnsons’ *I Am A Bird Now* (2005). In fact, Wasser has played with just about everyone who needed some quality violin and backing vocals. Meanwhile, she also found time to play in numerous bands of her own throughout the Nineties, before breaking out on her own in 2002, taking her name from the Seventies cop show, *Police Woman*, starring Burt Bacharach’s ex-wife Angie Dickinson.

Recent single *My Girl* starts things off and finds her sensitively singing about the world in stopped motion while the tune echoes the lyrics. Then, after a minute and a half, the song sparks into life; a nice bit of fuzz pedal here and there, a jazzy, populist mid-section there. The jazz element is so convincing that you can almost see the smoke in the air of a crowded club, while her sassy side recalls the much-maligned Sam Brown. Following that, *Prime Mover*, locks into a groove and moves with it, the song itself coupling a lo-fi reading with the mystery of Bowie.

It’s no happy accident that *Stagger Into The Light* falls in the middle of the record; it’s by far the best track and a wonderful centrepiece. Of all the many comparisons that Wasser has attracted so far — Dusty Springfield, Nina Simone, even Prince — the most pertinent has to be Chrissie Hynde, and this is nowhere more apparent than on this particular song. The sultriness, the ice cool attitude, being in the ideal position where women want to be her and men want to be with her. All these qualities shine through brightly, and what’s more, Wasser manages to achieve this in a few mere moments — the tempting lead up to the chorus and the inviting, yet insistent lyric “listen to me”. By the time the final refrain comes around, she’s paved it down to a satisfied “euff”, confident that she’s reeled you in. And all the while the song has swayed and stopped, copped an attitude, and rolled back in again.

Just how do you follow that? Well, it’s a difficult ask and Wasser has gamely stepped up to the plate. OK, so the final songs on the EP aren’t as good, but they’re still mighty fine efforts. *Game Of Life* sounds Middle Eastern, sashaying around for a bit before resorting to some helpless yelping towards the end, while *How Come You’re So Solid Gold?* is broodily hypnotic; its circular rhythms drawing you deeper and deeper into its black heart. This EP is a wonderful start to Joan’s solo career and promises plenty of interest for her forthcoming full-length, *Real Life*. **Russell Barker**

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**Jo Mango**

Glasgow-based chanteuse Jo Mango and her band have been treading the boards of the circuit for three years, each time bringing a winsome and quirky brand of folk to the good burghers of the city and the surrounding regions. In many ways, it’s difficult to fully separate Jo Mango the...
band from Jo Mango the artist. While the latter pens the songs (and hers is certainly a distinctive and attractive voice), the contributions of her fellow musical travellers bolster her signature sound. Backed by twin brother Jim on bass, Simon Fullarton on guitars and Calum Scott on percussion and guitar, the folk formula seems to have been adhered to. However, adding in Alan Peacock's engrossing background and harmony vocals, and Katherine Waumsley's flute and harp to Jo's own eclectic instrumentation, including concertina and even African thumb piano, and a much broader sonic canvas is immediately evident.

The haunting My Lung provides a stark introduction; Mango's delicate and childlike vocals pick out a hymn to the positive aspects of a dependence that's closer to symbiosis than parasitism. Tea Lights then sets out a more typical template for the album, with folksy guitar and vocals gradually accumulating other musical elements – a bit of glockenspiel here, a violin there – and these provide a gentle reflection and indeed an enhancement of the otherworldly lyrics. Peacock steps forward to share the mic on Gomer, as he and Mango swap verses like two lovers who are connected and yet lost to one another, culminating in a harmonious finale. The folksy mood continues elsewhere; How I'd Be finds Mango's musings on what might have been lifted up, up and away on well placed harmonies, while Waltz With Me is a wistful dance leavened by lilt- ing flute and accordion.

After Take Me Back's traditional hard knock life storytelling balladry, which happily strays into Sandy Den- ny/Vashti Bunyan territory (but with a stronger and more assured vocal delivery than the latter), a more contemporary edge comes to the fore. In fact, Hard Day could slot in nicely with Suzanne Vega's early catalogue — and that's no faint praise — while Blue Light swells from a hesitant, contemplative opening into a dark and brooding psychodrama, blowing moody portents on winds of overdriven electric gui-It's not exactly a conclusion; Mango has graciously tossed us a bonus track in the shape of Portugese Skies, a charming, idyllic song that neatly bookends with opener My Lung, wishing a true love a life where all is good and true. Although it first appeared on an early EP, it's a worthy addition to the album, which is in itself a more than worthy introduction to Mango's beautiful world. Here and there, the intangible essences of more meravick artists like Björk and Stina Nordenstam spiral just out of reach on the edges of perception as she deftly skirts the suburbs of folk with bucolic, dusky spirit. Trevor Raggatt

_Smoosh_  
_She Like Electric_  
Pattern 25

★ ★ ★

Just in case you haven't heard about the mini phenomenon that is Smoosh, here's a brief recap: two sisters from Seattle — Asya, 13, and Chloe, 11 — who play drums and keyboards and have been creating quite a stir amongst the alternative rock press both here and at home, whilst also garnering praise from many a respected musician. But can they really be any good? For me, the alarm bells started ringing when I read people on certain music forums going on about how great the band are. These are the sort of people that I've always maintained are constantly on the search for something more challenging, more obscure and hey, maybe more unlisten-able than what anyone else is “listening” to. They want to be the first on the block to uncover something new, something to impress their peers with just how avant-garde they are. Mind you, if Everett True likes them, there must be something worthy going on.

For a start there are some great musical moments; _She Like Electric_ has ideas a-plenty. After the Money Mark-style lo-fi of _Massive Cure_, the rolling Ben Folds-y piano of _It's Cold_ and the infectious jaunty _It's Not Your Day To Shine_, _Rad_ is the first moment that knocks you sideways. Eighties-style 'hip-pop' is the best way to describe it, with Asya and Chloe's youthful exuberance really coming to the fore through incessant chants of “yo guys”. Early signs of teenage angst are apparent on two of the best songs here. _La Pump_ is a deceptively chugging petulant number with a strappy riot grrl chorus, and _Bottleneose_ has a shouty, close to irritating intro but settles for some fine Bis-style screaming and space age keyboards. *Make It Through* once again spins the album on its head, with Asya's echoing vocals floating over a rumbling tune that's closer to Joy Division than anything else. Then I've Got My Own Problems To Fix manages to make riot grrl sound ethereal. The wonderfully titled and brief The Quack clocks in at under a minute and is a Monster Mash for the Buffy generation. Smoosh have quite a way with song titles — there's another on here called Pygmy Motorcycle.

But while there are many good points to the album, Asya's vocals are exactly how you'd expect a young kid to sound. It may be an unfair criticism, but it's a bit like going to see your child singing in the school play. Of course they sound wonderful, but then you're forced to sit through all the other kids' performances too. Which begs the question, who would choose to listen to this? But the main impression I'm left with is that _She Like Electric_ is the sound of a band warming up for something special. The ideas are bursting out of this album and one suspects that come album two they will be better, if not fully, formed.

Russell Barker

_Tilly & The Wall_  
_Wild Like Children_  
_Moshi Moshi_

★ ★ ★ ½

Tilly & The Wall are a Nebraska-based band who specialise in mesmerising lyrics about, well, getting drunk, falling over and generally being a bit depressed. The more impatient listener may feel inclined to put the album back on the shelf as soon as they realise this — after all, it's been done and bettered by many other Nebraskan bands well before them but those faithful to the album will be rewarded. Tilly & The Wall's major strength is Jamie Williams, their (female) tap dancer used in lieu of a drummer, who gives the music an inspiring ethos, quietening any mutters that they lack originality. Musically, the band are a peculiar mix of childhood
chants and disastrous relationships; Neely J’s growling vocals can only be compared to a five year old child who’s just smoked a pack of twenty.

Their official debut album also marks their first material to be released in the UK. Besser and Let It Rain give a confusingly folk sound to an arguably antifolk album, while Nights Of The Living Dead and Ice Storm, Big Gust & You are more akin to Bright Eyes’ Conor Oberst, who originally produced some of the tracks featured on the album. First single Reckless and Perfect Fit carry the same stomping (literally) theme, but the band wisely steer clear of the dangerous cliff called We Sound Like Franz Ferdinand (But We’re American, Yeah!). I Always Knew stands alone as the song that shows the band’s true potential, mixing all of their talents and sounds in equal measure, while also giving the album a wise and positive edge. The album only really falls short of being a classic because some of their better songs have been overlooked and left off of the album, replaced with Shake It Out, a mediocre tribute to the other nine tracks on the album.

The truth is, in five years’ time Wild Like Children will be under two inches of dust, because by then Tilly & The Wall will have released an album so stupendously good, so mind blowingly different and crucial, every album you own will be shoved under the bed or piled on your desk, cases cracked, collecting coffee stains. A second album, Bottoms Of Barrels, is waiting in the wings, but for now, this album is here to taunt you into submission and to patiently remind Nebraska that its artists can do better.

Liz Phair
Somebody’s Miracle
Capitol
★★★½

What would have happened if The Beatles had a fan forum between Revolver and Sgt Pepper’s? Or to Dylan when he went electric? Chances are they’d have still created work worthy of their genius, but the internet has stripped away the distance between creator and critic. Today you can send e-mails to artists with your opinions on their work, and it’s increasingly likely they’ll actually read it. Don’t believe me? Check out Adam Duritz’s forum on the Counting Crows website, a rare taste of a songwriter giving his admirers a taste of their own tongue-lashing. Is the musician just an avatar for the neuroses of their more, shall we say, ardent appreciators, or someone articulating their inner emotions for cathartic reasons? 99 of 100 artists will tell you, correctly, that they make music for themselves first. If we like it too, great. They’re not our personal troubadours. Get over it. Move on. Liz Phair has. Just listen to Everything To Me on which she sings: “...you never gave a damn about all of those things I did to please you / all that you wanted, you found somewhere else / and nothing could drag you away from yourself / do you really know me at all?”

I haven’t followed Phair since 1993’s Exile In Guyville. I haven’t queued in the rain for her gigs and I wouldn’t frame her placemat and put it above my pillow, turn around four times and chant her name before I sleep. For all the ignignant chorus of disapprovals and shouts of “sell out!” she’s suffered, an album of new material from Phair is something to be respected, if not treasured. If you don’t like it, don’t listen to it. You’ll be missing out though because Somebody’s Miracle is intelligent, adult power-pop. It’s rock in a suede glove, and it’s going to cost you a fortune because to really appreciate it you’ll need to buy a convertable, put the top down and crank up the stereo; this album is a summer stomper. It pushes all the right buttons at all the right times. There are Beach Boy backing vocals, minor chords when you expect major, stop-start verse/chorus structures and sweet vocals about love, sex and more love. It’s equal parts Aimee Mann, Blondie, Fountains Of Wayne and Sheryl Crow and, occasionally, a little of Phair’s back-catalogue spikiness. The title track, Stars & Planets and the glorious Count On My Love are songs to give your heart to. If you don’t tap your feet, I’ll eat mine.

Cons? The album pacing isn’t always brilliant, the two opening tracks don’t get out of the blocks and it’s two songs too long, but I’m not going to camp outside her flat and demand she changes it for me. It’s her album, her songs and her feelings. I’m just along for the ride. If the top’s down, I’ll be happy. Hell, I may even e-mail Liz and let her know.

Paul Woodgate

Broadcast
Tender Buttons
Warp
★★★★

For their third proper full-length, Birmingham’s finest purveyors of hook-laden electronica have produced a fresher, more pared down version of their millennial post-rock. Named after enigmatic American author Gertrude Stein’s 1911 novel, Tender Buttons sees the band operating for the first time as a threesome (singer Trish Keenan and partner James Cargill) following the departure of drummer/guitarist Tim Felton. Inevitably, the replacement of real drum sounds with softer electro beats has had a dramatic effect, giving the album a sparser, more minimalist feel than 2003’s fantastic Ha-Ha Sound. Samples, too, are limited and well used, with several motifs recurring across a number of songs, adding a depth to the proceedings as they interlace the album, giving it some much needed consistency. Sadly, it’s not quite enough to see the listener through its relatively short forty minute running time.

Although the album starts fantastically well and gets better as it proceeds throughout its first half, hitting a number of Death In Vegas-like, carefully weighted notes, that’s about as far as it goes. Indeed, the disc arguably peaks over its first four well-arranged and impacting songs — I Found The F, Black Cat, the title track and the excellent first single American Boy — before breaking out the old acoustic guitar for Tears In The Typing Pool and returning to high-gear electro again for the comparatively driving Corporeal.

The other eight songs, however, are significantly less affecting and somewhat sketchy. Not even Klein’s coolly dispassionate singing redeems them, although it’s fair to say that Michael A Grammar stands out from the crowd. There are plenty of appealing noises to be sure, but none of them seem to hang together as finished songs, in sharp relief to the polish in evidence earlier on. Overall then, the first half of Tender Buttons is worth a listen or seven, but it could have been cut down to a really fine EP. Shame.

Peter Morrow
As anyone who has ever caught one of her live shows would know, Beth Orton has a wicked sense of humour that’s absolutely unprepossessing. So the fact that her fourth album opens with Worms’ lyrical shot right out of the leftfield ballpark might hardly even register were it not so utterly nutso. And when the chorus proclaims her an “apple-eatin’ heathen”, you’d be forgiven for thinking she’s been tucked away these past four years living on a diet of Fiona’s strange fruit. The comparison is all but inescapable, really; the jazzy bounce of Ted Barnes’ drums and Orton’s piano coated with some of her most pithy lyrics to date could easily fit on Extraordinary Machine (2005), the tricksy changes in cadence and phrasing notwithstanding. It’s a healthy sign of life, and so while the countrified, nature-will-prevail groove of Countenance lands us on more familiar ground, there’s plenty to keep the interest piqued. Witness the glorious use of Orton’s own backing vocals and Barnes’ softly frenetic drumming in the final chorus and be in no doubt that this is her most fully realised record yet.

How refreshing then to discover that the whole thing was committed to tape in roughly a fortnight. It seems that although Orton has been playing with some of these songs for at least two years, all it needed was the flinty-voiced northerner to find the right somebody to spark off. After abortive sessions with Adem and Four Tet’s Kieran Hebden, Orton teamed up with producer Jim O’Rourke (most recently a member of a resurgent Sonic Youth) and the magic, it seems, finally happened. Given that O’Rourke’s past production duties have lurched between disparate styles, his relatively hands off approach to Comfort Of Strangers does Orton many great favours. Never before has she sounded so nuanced and personable, even on her benchmark album Central Reservation (1999). She’s always been a fantastic singer, but by allowing her vocals more space in the mix, more prominence, she’s nothing short of sensational. Sure, she still has a tendency to slur out some of the lyrics, but her economy of diction works in these sparser surroundings.

Lead single Conceived is simply the best thing she’s released in years, with its insistent drum beat, handsome swells of organ and strings, huge singalong chorus and the sweet trill of O’Rourke’s marimba. The soft brushed cymbals, gently plucked guitar and sparkly piano interludes of the sumptuous title track are downright irresistible. Lyrically, too, it’s a beauty. The plaintive chorus of “I’d rather have no love than messing with the wrong stuff, it’s just the comfort of strangers” is a perfect example of Orton’s skilfully understated and tender confessionals. Elsewhere, Heartland Truckstop is a neat continuation of the road trip iconography that runs through her work like a dusky beautiful bruise, while Shopping Trolley and Pieces Of Sky echo the celestial fixation of her earlier songs like Galaxy Of Emptiness and Stars All Seem To Weep.

Happily, it’s equally impossible to single out a favourite track as it is to pick out a weak one. Heart Of Soul is certainly a contender for the former honour; a strident, near-anthemic little number, it boasts some of Orton’s most convincing vocals and lyrical gems like “you can’t watercolour a firecracker” and the commanding refrain of “I don’t care how much religion you’ve got, you gotta put a little love in your heart” all add up to something pretty damn special.

That said, this won’t be to everyone’s taste. Even a decade on from her unit-shifting debut Trailer Park, some will still bemoan the exclusion of any electronica here, but it’s plainly obvious and has been for some time now that Orton has no interest in rejuvenating the hackneyed ‘comedown queen’ tag ungainly thrust upon her in the old days. Now in her mid-thirties, Orton has shown with Comfort Of Strangers that she has something exquisite and different to bring to the Big Chill table. And it’s better than anyone could ever have foreseen.

Alan Pedder
The last few years have seen a resurgence in the mainstream of female singers unafraid to let it rock, at least politely. Whether it’s the sk8er ‘punk’ of Avril Lavigne, the big vocals of Anastacia and Kelly Clarkson or Michelle Branch’s more acoustic offerings, there’s clearly a market for well-written pop songs with guitars aplenty. It’s into this particular arena that Lancashire-born, London-based singer-songwriter Tamsin Warley has firmly planted her feet, her debut album setting out a stall packed with attractive produce.

Overseen by Tamsin herself, in cahoots with former SnowDogs Ville and Mat Leppanen, at East London’s Atomic Studios, Wide Open Sky is no shabbily recorded portastudio fodder; from a technical point of view, the results are mighty impressive. The rockier numbers are imbued with a mixture of modern angular guitar sounds mixed together and shaken up with an almost subliminal retro sheen, while the keyboard flourishes recall some of the great pop songs of the late Eighties and early Nineties, but never drag them back through a timewarp. And while this remains a thoroughly contemporary pop album, the excellent production would be largely irrelevant without decent songs and a great performance. Fortunately, Warley really delivers on these counts too. Her vocal style is perfectly suited to this type of music, clear and rich with the strength to impose herself during the louder moments but tender enough to convince in the softer lulls.

The quality of the self-penned songs is thankfully equal to the delivery. While dealing with fairly universal themes of life, love and the search for significance, they are a million miles from the usual pop platitudes – there is a real depth to Warley’s lyrics. The writing is observant and insightful, picking up on the minutiae of life (…but when I found her text to you / there was nothing else to do / ’cause I’d lost you once and for all…) which are so often symbiotic of the broader picture – a technique so well exploited by the likes of Ulvaeus and Andersson. Macefin Avenue looks back to a life that never was in a Manchester suburb to ponder the effects of the choices we make in love. Even when delivering the classic break-up song, Warley’s emphasis is never on self-pity but on a woman learning from her mishaps and moving on to something better.

The faster songs are similarly inspiring; opener Drive For Miles is the quintessential top-down, foot-to-the-floor classic, while Dance Like No One Is Watching is a glorious hymn to the pleasure of surrendering to the moment. In a softer gear, Warley subtly recalls the better aspects of Beverley Craven, but when cranked up the comparisons are harder to pin down. There’s perhaps a touch of Annie Lennox with Chrisie Hynde’s attitude; elsewhere, maybe a hint of Shawn Colvin’s rockier side – but Warley is never indistinct.

That said, much of Wide Open Sky wouldn’t be out of place sat at the top of the charts in the hands (or rather, the tonsils) of the aforementioned Ms. Clarkson or Newkirk. With a good publishing deal and contacts, a comfier retirement fund could certainly be assured. However, with the right backing, opportunities and a side order of luck, there’s no reason why she couldn’t take the songs there herself. The pop music market may be crowded and cut-throat, but Warley could be one to succeed in that particular den of fiery dragons.

Trevor Raggatt

Juliana Hatfield

Made In China

Ye Olde Records

So Juliana Hatfield is back with her tenth solo album, as challenging and contrary as ever. If, like me, you lost track of her somewhere around album three, 1995’s Only Everything, this is a chance to renew your acquaintance. Called Made In China to indicate her disposable and marketable state, the album features her stripped bare on the cover. Being Juliana, it’s just her torso, there to also represent where her music comes from. Like many artists, after early major label experience, Hatfield retreated to the underground and the safety of a small independent label and the freedom to do her own prolific thing. So after releasing almost one album per year, not to mention various band reunions and side project Some Girls, has the former Blake Baby grown up?

Well, the album kicks off in familiar territory with the classic brooding power-pop of New Waif, all the sass of old coming to the fore. It’s to the lyrics you should look for a statement of intent, with their opening plea of “you better give this girl something, because she’s dying for a lie”. What Do I Care continues the nostalgia trip, its bratty vocals accompanying a slice of Babes In Toyland-style grunge, a trick that’s similarly employed and even trumped on Stay Awake. It’s the former, however, that lyrically sums up the fragile and paradoxical mood of the album. See: “I feel funny. Is it over? / Am I dead or asleep on the sofa? / Made in China for the masses, I’m cheap and plastic / There’s millions of us. Yeah. / You can buy me / You can break me / You can laugh but you’ll see it’s so easy / What the fuck? / It’s a miracle I’m even here”.

It’s at this point that you realise what a big debt Avril Lavigne and her ilk owe to Hatfield. She barged the doors open and got trampled in the rush as the anodyne clones polished the product, making it more palatable and MTV friendly. This however is the real thing, challenging the listener yet remaining immensely tuneful. On Video is Redd Kross-flavoured Seventies rock, Hole In The Sky goes for a hippie-ish acoustic feel, while Oh pinches a slice of the riff from Suede’s The Drowners and gets all slinky on us. In the rocker mid-section, My Pet Lion kicks off like an early Bangles track, followed by the feisty power-pop of Going Blonde. Rats In The Attic is reminiscent of Nirvana from 1993’s Become What You Are, with Hatfield fitting a little girl lost vocal over a grinding rock tune. There’s a big flourish to finish, a sinister and spooky number called A Doe & Two Fawns, which begins with wending electric guitar that leads into double-tracked vocals, before segueing into a long fadeout, with a shaker adding to the ill feeling.

That, in turn, leads into Send Money, a
Arriving just a few months after a less-than-essential tenth anniversary acoustic edition of her mighty debut, *Jagged Little Pill* (1995), it’s possible to view this hits compilation of Morissette’s work as symptomatic of record label desperation. Are Maverick simply trying their hardest to wring as much mileage as possible out of the back catalogue of an artist who, for many, has failed to fulfil the creative or commercial promise of her phenomenal early success? Errant thoughts such as these may well pass through your mind as you listen to *The Collection*. In all fairness, however, this retrospective does have a little more to offer than such a cynical assessment suggests. In particular, for those who gave up on Morissette in the late Nineties — that is, about mid-way through the endurance test that was *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie* (1998) — *The Collection* functions as a valuable recap of what she’s been up to since, and a chance for listeners to reflect upon the qualities that make her, at times, a very special artist indeed. Unfortunately, though, the record also offers a few clues as to why her post-*Pill* output has been somewhat less than stellar.

The eighteen tracks chosen for the album are a broadly representative selection: five songs from *Jagged Little Pill*, a smattering from her other studio records, one from her *MTV Unplugged* disc, a trio of soundtrack contributions, some rarities, and a new cover (for less casual listeners, a special digipak edition supplements the CD with a one-hour documentary and a few other extras). There are, inevitably, some regrettable omissions: superior album cuts such as *Front Row*, *Narcissus*, *Surrendering*, *21 Things I Want In A Lover* and *That Particular Time* would have better displayed her gifts than some of the chosen tracks, but then no ‘best of’ collection ever pleased everyone. Less surprisingly, but perhaps a little disappointingly for some, there’s nothing featured from her early days as a teenage bubble-permed popstar either. The inclusion of some particularly obscure tracks (such as *Mercy*, her contribution to Jonathan Elias’s 1999 project of multi-language devotional songs entitled *The Prayer Cycle*) indicates that Morissette intends *The Collection* to be something rather more ambitious than a standard greatest hits package.

The sequencing is non-chronological and begins with ... *Junkie’s* enduring first single *Thank U*, one of several of her beguiling paens to experience as teacher. Of the less familiar tracks, *Sister Blister* (from the 2002 CD/DVD package, *Feast On Scraps*) rocks nicely and offers a trenchant view of gender roles and female competitiveness. The aforementioned *Mercy* is a bizarre inclusion, however; a botched attempt at spiritual rapture on which Morissette (singing in Hungarian) duets with Salif Keita. As admirable as her decision not to follow a predictable course with this release is, it’s a tactic that often backfires and renders *The Collection* a rather uneven listening experience.

Indeed, quality control is sadly variable throughout. At her best, Morissette is a witty and insightful writer whose songs excavate sharp emotional truths; at her worst, she sounds like she’s reciting from a self-help manual, and a second-rate one at that. For every subtle, surprising lyrical detail that strikes a nerve, such as “I remembered you the moment I met you” in *Simple Together*, there’s a corresponding slide into cringe-making banality: “I thought we’d be sexy together... I thought we’d have children together.” Also exposed is her irritating penchant for repetitious ‘listing’ song structures. This compositional style — an attempt at litany? — allows little room for ambiguity, nuance or progression beyond glib paradoxes of the “I’m the funniest woman you’ve ever known... I’m the dullest woman you’ve ever known” / “I’m your doubt and your conviction” variety.

Morissette’s vocal performances can be similarly erratic. Her singing on *Jagged Little Pill* had character, edge, spontaneity and the power to command your attention. And while these qualities are still sometimes in evidence on her later work, they have mostly been stifled by increasingly slick and soulless production. To listen to her music is to bear witness to a gradual erosion of personality. She is, *The Collection* also reveals, an artist whose interpretive skills still require honing. A new cover of Seal’s *Crazy* is passable, though utterly undistinguished, but an over-eager take on Cole Porter’s *Let’s Do It* (*Let’s Fall In Love*) from the *De-Lovely* soundtrack cruelly exposes her limitations, sticking out like the proverbial sore thumb. Since many of her songs are somewhat similar in tempo, a little of her work can go a long way. Whatever their deficiencies, quieter moments such as *Simple Together* and *That I Would Be Good* do offer a needed respite.

The nicest surprise though is just how well the *Jagged Little Pill* tracks have worn: *You Oughta Know* retains its startling ferocity, *Head Over Feet* reveals itself as a surprisingly sweet love song, while *Hand In My Pocket* remains a glorious anthem. But then you probably own all those songs already and they gain little when presented out of context. Of the other tracks, the disturbing *Hands Clean* — which does allow for some lyrical ambiguity — is one that you may find yourself returning to. That Morissette is a talented young artist who has yet to fully find her voice on record is the abiding impression given by *The Collection*. Hopefully, its release will mark a turning point in her career, freeing her up to reconnect with her muse and thereby take her music in some interesting new directions. *Alex Ramon*
There are two things that Rodrigo y Gabriela, a pair of Mexican ex-pats now based in Dublin, want you to know above all else. One, they aren’t siblings and two, they don’t, I repeat DON’T play flamenco music. It’s easy to see why one might make that mistake though; their music is certainly infused to overflowing with Latin passion. It can be frenetic and in your face, is played on nylon-strung Spanish guitars and features stirring melodies that float above energetic instrumentation that mixes percussion and guitar in equal amounts… flamenco, surely? Only if you insist on missing the point. You see, Rodrigo y Gabriela were originally members of Tierra Acida, one of Mexico’s premier metal bands, before quitting for Europe in 1999. So, yes, the music does contain flamenco elements but it mines a cluster of other genres too – pop, classical, funk, heavy metal and Al di Meola-esque jazz fusion – all performed on acoustic guitars. Having already gained a glowing reputation as a live act and assorted critical dribblings with their previous albums Re-Foc (2003) and Live–Manchester & Dublin (2004), this John Leckie-produced eponymous release seems set to break them to a wider audience, and deservedly so.

Whilst both are virtuos in their own right, playing duties are split with Rodrigo taking the majority of the lead lines and Gabriela holding down the rhythm. However, this shouldn’t be taken to imply that she plays the subordinate role behind the male guitar hero. In fact, in many ways, it is Gabriela’s energised and muscular playing style that characterises the duo’s unique sound. Rodrigo’s fluid and emotional melodies are easy on the ear and lodge in the consciousness, and the thought occurs that this could be just the guitar style that Jimi Hendrix, Hank Marvin and John Schofield might have come up with if they’d grown up together in the hills of Andalusia. But without Gabriela’s astonishing rhythms, it could very well just be shredding. Hers truly is rhythm playing, seamlessly incorporating percussion into the chordal playing, tapping flamenco-style on golpeadores and tapping plates but goes far beyond. No part of the guitar is safe from her onslaught and so breathtakingly intricate is her playing that her right hand is often little more than a blur.

Parts of the album are truly astonishing. Somewhere a jaunty jazz motif morphs into a metal-based arpeggio solo. Somewhere else a Sixties cop show guitar line merges into a sassy Mexican melody. Ixtapa boasts the album’s only guest musician in the shape of violinist Roby Lakatos who liberally sprinkles it with gypsy jazz improvs. Two rather unexpected covers — Led Zeppelin’s Stairway To Heaven and Metallica’s Orion, join the seven original numbers. Frankly, whether we really need another version of Stairway... now that we have the definitive cover (“...can ya tell what it is yet...”) is debatable, but fortunately Rodrigo y Gabriela free the song from its lyrical strictures and provide an entirely new take on the classic. All the signature melodies and sounds are there but in Rodrigo y Gabriela’s hands, the over familiar aunt of your record collection becomes a suddenly attractive second cousin once removed. Orion is presented firmly on its own terms, underlining the duo’s determination not to be tied down by ticking the tired boxes marked genre. Certainly the opening verses utilise metal-styled riffing, but they do so in a manner that disentangles them from expectation. The dreamy slide guitar introduced towards the end shows, yet again, that the word ‘boundaries’ is not a familiar component of Rodrigo y Gabriela’s vocabulary.

This magnificently inventive album is guaranteed to have any fan of instrumental guitar music enthralled from the very first bars. Even casual music fans will surely come away from this with uplifted spirits and a goofy smile. Also, if you’re quick off the blocks, you may be able to snap up one of the limited edition copies complete with bonus DVD. Well worth the price of admission, it contains a documentary, three stunning live performances and a short tutorial showing how to capture the opening track Tamacun in Rodrigo y Gabriela style – do try this at home folks!

Trevor Raggatt
**Amy Wadge**

**No Sudden Moves**

*Manhattan Records*

★★★½

If just a single word were to sum up the career to date of Bristol-born, Cardiff-based singer-songwriter Amy Wadge, it would probably be ‘almost’. After the richly promising start of gritty mini-album *The Famous Hour* (2002), her debut album proper, 2004’s *WOJ*, was an over-produced error of judgement and went mostly unregarded. Even so, Wadge has twice managed to trump the likes of Cerys Matthews and Charlotte Church at the Welsh Music Awards, yet despite working with and supporting some of the most respected names in the business and representing Wales as a cultural ambassador, Wadge has somehow failed to filter into the realms of public recognition outside of blessed Cymru. If a mixture of talent and hard work alone guaranteed anything in the music industry, she might already be a household name. So does *No Sudden Moves* have the legs to right this sorry inequality?

You know, it really just might. Sticking to the blueprint of its title, the album provides a baker’s dozen of likeable, mellow, middle-of-the-road cuts, but this in itself should not be taken as damnation with faint praise. The songs here may be accessible and easy on the ear, but they are not by inference bland or undemanding.

Lyrical preoccupations include intelligent musings on life and love with the odd wink at social politics; take, for instance, the first two single releases. The first, *LISA, We’ll Wait & See*, was released late last year in both Welsh and English language versions and explores that all too human tendency of running away to find meaning and significance when those things were already at hand, if you’d only taken time to look. The second, soon to be released is an exquisite cover of the Manic Street Preachers’ *A Design For Life*. From the moment Wadge’s bare and exposed vocal intones the lyric “Libraries gave us power then work came and set us free / what price now for a shallow piece of dignity?” backed only by skeletal right-hand piano, you realise you’re in for something truly special. Stripped of the Manics’ raging guitar onslaught, the song loses none of its power. Indeed, the aching passion for righteousness and a decent life for the ordinary person in Nicky Wire’s lyrics are thrown into even sharper relief.

It has never been in doubt that Amy Wadge possesses a voice of astonishing strength and beauty. Smoky and seductively sibilant, each performance drips with feeling and is delivered at either a visceral or higher emotional level depending on the context. Whilst the production takes an open, acoustic approach that complements the vocal performance nicely, *No Sudden Moves* is not an exercise in minimalism. On the contrary, acoustic guitars, piano, double bass and other instruments such as strings and muted trumpet conspire to create a lush soundscape that envelops the listener whilst allowing the music to breathe. Bringing to mind the work of Mary Black in the 1990s, these songs are smooth but not soulless, produced but still organic. Some songs recall the arrangements of Julia Fordham; others are stripped back to the bare essentials of guitar or piano and lovely harmonies (No Sudden Moves, *Worry About You*).

Readily grabbing the ear with a subtle immediacy, *No Sudden Moves* nevertheless retains enough appeal to reward digging deeper and repeated auditions. It’s an album that should attract the attentions of stations like Radio 2 and a listenership that responds to well-writen, well-sung songs. Neither tortoise nor hare, *No Sudden Moves* is the sound of moderate progression and a sturdy bid for wider recognition. *Trevor Raggatt*

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**Lise Westzynthius**

**Rock, You Can Fly**

*One Little Indian*

★★★★★

Although you’ve most likely never heard of new One Little Indian signing Lise Westzynthius, *Rock, You Can Fly* is actually her second solo album, but the first to be released outside of her native Denmark. Looking further in reverse, she was once part of a critically acclaimed band named Luksus who lasted for two albums before disbanding. No wispy-voiced newcomer then, Westzynthius has been admired by many for years, and this album only cemented that status; *Rock, You Can Fly* won her both the vocalist and album of the year awards at last year’s Prize of Danish Music Critics. Upon hearing the album, it’s not hard to believe; it’s a work of high calibre and incredible beauty.

Lise was first exposed to music by her Finnish grandmother, who was a pianist in Helsinki. During the long Finnish summers, she was exposed to Brahms and Chopin, both of which clearly had a profound effect — the classical influence is prominent on *Rock, You Can Fly*, with simple piano melodies that take their time to develop, and instruments that complement the entire sound rather than carving their own individual spaces. This is a delicate record, full of subtleties that make for a rich but intimate sound. Take *Reparation* for example; it’s a slow, uncomplicated song that manages to be utterly mesmerising despite barely changing for nearly five minutes.

Breathy and dreamlike, Lise’s vocals make it is easy to imagine her as a tiny elfin creature, fragile and helpless. Occasionally, however, she displays real vocal strengths — “She is strong, but in a frail way” she coos early on, perhaps self-referentially. Lyrical, *Rock, You Can Fly* explores the themes of love, loss, death and Arctic cliffs, simultaneously conveying the epic and the deeply personal.

First single *Séance* is about a dead lover coming back to whisper comforting words in your ear, and it perfectly conjures up that spooked feeling when you don’t know if what you just experienced was a dream or reality. *Northermost* is a simple refrain about the cold morning mist, while *Cowboys & Indians* makes turf into playful whimsy and the magic of childhood. Mostly though, the songs deal with loss, or whether you ever really had what you were looking for in the first place, such as on the beautiful *Sans Souci*. Her message is ambiguous, however, especially when coupling joyful melodies with heartbreaking sadness on the devastating *Mousquetaire*.

The art of creating rich but quiet soundscapes seem to have been perfected by the Scandinavians. Much of *Rock, You Can Fly* bears a similarity to the work of Sigur Rós, but with a voice more akin to that of Stína Nordenstam. Yet Lise’s music feels a great deal more personal, as if she couldn’t help but tell you her secrets. The album takes you through her joy, her pain, her longing. We’re closer to her by the end of it, as well as closer to ourselves. *Bryn Williams*
Mary Lee's Corvette
Love, Loss & Lunacy
Self-released ★★★★

Album number four finds former book editor Mary Lee Kortes serving up yet another accomplished set of resolutely uplifting pop songs with a retro feel and a country tinge. It may seem odd to ascribe the word uplifting to a song suite tackling such issues as incest (Verla), the perverse pleasure of Schadenfreude (I'm Saving Grace) and the acceptance of directionless wandering (Lucky Me), but the attitude with which these subjects are approached really does raise the spirits. Each of the dozen songs is infused with signature Sixties pop jangle, smooth Hammond sounds and country rock harmonies that provide a sonic consistency whilst leaving plenty of scope for ringing the changes.

Keen-eared listeners will notice that several songs appear to feature small quotations from classic hits or artists, not so far as to lead to a string of plagiarism lawsuits, but enough to evoke a mood from the outset. All That Glitters kicks things off with a sunny West Coast vibe with chiming guitars and Farfisa organ tootling in the background. Learn From What I Dream begins as an etude on The Beatles' Things We Said Today and shares the Fab Four's search for enlightenment. Wasting The Sun quotes even more directly, with an All Right Now-style opening riff that mutates into something that could easily have been written either by or for Sheryl Crow. Indeed, the vocal similarity here is enough to merit a mention.

Other tracks ploughing this particular furrow include Nothing Left To Say, Thunderstruck and Falling Again, adding in a sprinkle of Mary Chapin Carpenter, and, in the case of the latter, some more Tom Petty-style grit. Verla chooses the driving rhythm of songs like Petty's Refugees as a template to address the question of helping a victim of incest to escape a cycle of abuse. Not an obvious subject matter for a pop song, but the lyrics are sensitively tailored while the instrumentation injects a sense of passion and urgency. Lucky Me returns to the Crow template but views it through the filter of Eric Clapton's 461 Ocean Boulevard (1974), the guitar solos drawing deeply from both sources while the lyrics ponder the pros and cons of being set adrift and left to your own devices.

While Kortes' performance is not so distinctive as to be unmistakable, she certainly delivers an assured, attractive and pleasing sound, and that, after all, is really what's required. I'm Saving Grace, however, sees a transformation in her style as she channels Chrissie Hynde for a Pretenders-esque number. Sufficient to say, if Kortes ever turns up on Celebrity Stars In Their Eyes there are no prizes for guessing who she'll be. Rather more mechanical, however, is Blood Of Stones, its stilted rhythms failing to convince and providing the low point of an otherwise excellent album. Where Did I Go Wrong, Elton John? is a mini masterpiece with Kortes playing the role of a failed songwriter asking the eponymous idol how come her songs have never been hits. So far, so humdrum, but the magic twist is that the lyrics are constructed almost entirely from fragments of Taupin/John song titles and words, while the inspired soundtrack hits you like a big pizza pie with its cod-Italian mandolins. Apparently Sir Elt himself loves it. Rounding things off in a gentler mood, Every Song Is Different is a thought-provoking gem that leaves the listener wondering whether Kortes has been winking at us all along with her musical magpie tendencies... "every song is different but the singer is the same". Trevor Raggatt

The Knife
Silent Shout
Brille ★★★★

Most people think they don't know The Knife, a leftfield, electro-meets-calypso feminist duo hailing from Stockholm, Sweden. But they'd be wrong of course, for singer-songwriter du jour José González's breakthrough ad soundtrack single, Heartbeats, is in fact a cover of his countrymen's original. The Knife are certainly an interesting prospect; consciously enigmatic, they have (until now) refused to play live but for one three-song set at London's ICA where the lighting was forced so low that they could barely even be seen. They are, in essence, anti-performance and in that respect are the polar opposite of fellow electro purveyors like Fischerspooner, Peaches and Chicks On Speed.

Compared with their two previous albums, this is a pointedly minimalist affair, and in some ways even more low-key than 2003's Deep Cuts, a record that was rich in ice-cool synths and steel drums. Silent Shout is still characteristically The Knife, however, with a distinctive sound that's somewhere between mid-Nineties post-rave dance chart fodder and cutting-edge electro, with warped and sinister vocals throughout. But this time, The Knife seem more preoccupied with forging a vista of haunting electro landscapes than the punchy weird-pop found on their debut. The title track and lead single clearly highlights the difference; the song barely builds from where it starts out, instead preferring to simmer nastily along with its heavily distorted male/female duetting vocals only serving to feed their mysterious image.

As ever, the political commentaries are both abstract and obscure. At times it even feels that maybe, just maybe, The Knife have adopted some kind of Brechtian alienation as a means of forcing the listener to detach from emotionally engaging with the music, perhaps to enable more critical thinking of the impact of the sound. Whatever, much of Silent Shout is a decidedly cold and dark affair; We Share Our Mother's Health proclaims "we came down from the North" and you certainly don't doubt them. Elsewhere, Forest Families' lyrics of communists, masks and being far from the city strongly convey a sense of isolation and otherness, rendering it one of the most chilling inclusions.

Intentionally difficult then, Silent Shout is much too odd in too many places for primetime radio play, despite some moments being suitably melodic. So while their work on Deep Cuts and the recent (and criminally under-distributed!) Robyn album shows their undeniable pop credentials, as You Take My Breath Away states quite plainly, Silent Shout is here to let you know that The Knife don't like it easy; they don't like it the straight way. Robbie de Santos
Following the dissolution of Skunk Anansie in 2000 after three albums that successfully blended punk and metal with anthemic pop and soul and a 1999 headline slot at Glastonbury, a solo career was almost inevitable for Skin, their charismatic incendiary frontwoman. However, her first solo effort, 2003’s *Fleshwounds*, was a sparse, lo-fi and introspective record that dismally failed to register in the public consciousness and quickly dropped off the radar. Fast forward three years and it’s no surprise that solo album number two, *Fake Chemical State*, heralds a return to our heroine’s rock roots. From the cover art depicting her collapsed on a ceramic floor, face painted in junkie chic (a none-too-subtle literalisation of the album title, perhaps?), the self-proclaimed leader of clit rock is evidently keen to reaffirm her territory, changing record labels to V2 and bringing Strokes producer Gordon Raphael on board. Always defying expectation — after all, how many black skinhead lesbian singers are there in the white boy rock world? — and without any real comparison, Skin only needs to live up to her own high standards.

For the most part she succeeds. After the radio-unfriendly *Fleshwounds*, Skunk Anansie fans looking for a fix of nostalgia will not be disappointed by *Fake Chemical State*, which comes complete with softly softly verses that suddenly break into bombastic choruses — the aural equivalent of shaking your hand before slapping you square in the face. *Alone In My Room*, one of four co-writes with former Mansun frontman Paul Draper, is a flashback to 1997 and Mansun’s own particular brand of pretentious prog-rock. It’s the perfect album opener, full of dirty chords, clipped post-punk vocals and a glorious pop chorus. The latest single release, *Just Let The Sun*, another Draper co-write, also comes complete with crunching post-grunge guitars layered with multi-tracked vocals that makes for an unmistakeable, but perhaps too familiar listen.

What mars the album slightly is a sense of identity crisis; like a nasty neighbour with 20ft Leylandii, the edgier tracks leave the sensitive songs in the shade, which is especially a shame with the dreamy swirling riffs of album closer *Falling For You*, a song that reveals Skin’s vocals at their best, honest and pure. Like former labelmate Björk, Skin can make effortless octave leaps that would leave lesser singers breathless, and her patented wind-tunnel scream is in full force here, meaning the catchier songs like the slow building *Don’t Need A Reason* have all the necessary ingredients to become live favourites.

Lyrically, *Fake Chemical State* is a demanding listen, balancing youthful petulance and bittersweet reflection. The cut-and-paste words of the punkier songs seem strung together solely for musical effect, while the sensitive numbers display a lyrical heart-on-sleeve intensity. Most poignantly on the Linda ‘Non-Blonde’ Perry-produced *Nothing But*, Skin sings of a lost love who has since moved on: “please ignore the particular way I smile / take no notice of the blood on the lip I bite / I am still your friend”.

Wisely, *Fake Chemical State* is not simply an attempt to repeat the formula of her past successes, and there is enough here to suggest that Skin is finally moving in a direction where she feels comfortable and confident. Clocking in at just over half an hour, the album hints at finer things to come and the fact that it also makes for an enjoyable listen is simply a happy coincidence. **Stephen Collings**
As coincidence would have it, Rhino’s 2CD *Retrospective* of Natalie Merchant’s solo career follows a similar format to its Jane Siberry *Anthology*. In both cases, an exemplary, beautifully sequenced first disc is followed by a patchier, less satisfying second one. This is not to suggest that fans or newcomers should only sport out for the first CD though, as is possible to do in the case of Merchant. Though longstanding followers may once again lament the dearth of new material on *Retrospective*, there are in fact some lovely individual performances on both discs. It’s simply that the second disc — designed, it would appear, to showcase Merchant’s stylistic range — fails to cohere as effortlessly as the first does.

Of course, Merchant is not an audacious musical innovator in the Siberry mould, and so there is nothing as wilfully perverse or off-kilter as *Peony* here. Rather, Merchant’s post-10,000 Maniacs career has been marked by a series of graceful, intelligent and frequently exceptional albums, from her solo debut *Tigerlily* (1995) through the lusher *Ophelia* (1998) to her distinguished collection of sturdy folk perennials, *The House Carpenter’s Daughter* (2003), and this compilation gathers together some of the very best material from each. Merchant’s singing has also grown more characterful over the years, as the chronologically sequenced first disc demonstrates. Tremulous and delicate, but with a surprising amount of bite and grit, her vocals are seductive and inviting on early tracks such as the driving *Wonder* and *Jealousy*, but gain greater depth and resonance on her later work.

At its best, there is a kind of open-hearted innocence and generosity of spirit to Merchant’s music. *Kind & Generous*, for example, is such a forthright expression of gratitude that it almost makes you uncomfortable. This tender magnanimity means that when she does despair — with a line like “the damage that some people do” on *Break Your Heart* — the effect is particularly devastating. However, the superb *Life Is Sweet* offers hard-won consolation, as does *Motherland*, the title track to her 2001 album, and a recording that may well be on its way to becoming her signature song, since it’s already been covered by both Joan Baez and Christy Moore. Its combination of striking lyrics, Van Dyke Parks’ accordion, Greg Leisz’s banjo and mandolin and a gorgeous vocal from Merchant adds up to something very special indeed. *The House Carpenter’s Daughter* is represented by two particularly strong tracks. *Owensboro* is an achingly sad traditional ballad about downtrodden Kentucky mill workers; in the final verse, the exploited and apparently resigned narrator looks forward to a (literal or figurative) “day of judgement” when the wealthy, arrogant townsfolk who “dress so fine and spend their money free” will “have to share their pretty things”. Never has the desire for revolution been expressed more elegantly. The woozy, haunting *Sally Ann* is equally fine.

The second disc pulls together some of Merchant’s duets, collaborations, outtakes and soundtrack contributions. Highlights include a sensitive, convincing rendition of *The Lowlands Of Holland* (backed by The Chieftains), a slow and sultry *One Fine Day* (from the 1996 Michelle Pfeiffer/George Clooney film of the same name), and a beautiful stripped-down solo piano take of *Ophelia’s Thick As Thieves*. Lowlights are a leaden *Children Go Where I Send Thee*, and a forced version of the inappropriately titled *I Know How To Do It*, made most famous by Dinah Washington. Collaborations with REM, Billy Bragg and Susan McKeown almost, but don’t quite work, while the closing *Come Take A Trip In My Airship* unfortunately ends up on the wrong side of twee. Despite these infelicities, however, *Retrospective* is, overall, a very impressive collection that fully displays Merchant’s lyrical and interpretive gifts. *Alex Ramon*
The Rogers Sisters The Invisible Deck Too Pure ★★★½

Having finally managed to break out of their slightly hipsterish leftie prison with last year’s mini-album Three Fingers, New York rockers The Rogers Sisters are back with their second full-length, The Invisible Deck. Singer/guitarist Jennifer Rogers explains that the album’s title comes from a card trick her father used to do when she and sister Laura (drums) were kids: “It’s mind-blowing, like real magic. Plus, we thought the word deck had a lot of different implications — decks are stacked and played, people and halls are decked, there are tape decks. The word invisible has a double meaning too; it can mean powerless or it can mean sneaky.”

It comes as no surprise then that the album is a thickly layered piece of work, full of distorted guitars, oddly muffled drums and slightly hypnotising vocals. The one non-related band member of the Rogers clan, singer/bassist Miyuki Furtado (no relation of Nelly) explains that they tried to experiment with writing music that had more of a classic song structure, something that better exhibited their melancholic and slightly sinister personalities. Unlike the bass- and beat-laden Three Fingers, The Invisible Deck certainly succeeds in showing off the dark side of the trio. At first sounding not unlike a bunch of stroppy children banging on the floor in frustration (indie dancefloor hit Why Won’t You?), the mood then shifts through a Scissor Sisters-in-therapy midsection before culminating in the creepy, drugged-up and drawn out finale of Sooner Or Later.

The Rogers Sisters certainly aren’t shy of using a variety of unusual amps and guitars or of experimenting with sound through creative mic placements and covering drums with different materials. The recording mix, however, lets the usually energetic trio down; there’s hardly any dynamic range and the vocals either drown in heavy, messy guitar licks or seem strangely detached from the instrumental soundscapes. Former single Emotion Control, which was re-recorded for the album, particularly suffers.

Overall, the arrangements are fairly simplistic, and apart from the use of percussion and occasional flute (see the brooding, near seven-minute epic Your Littlest World), the songs vary little instrumentally. The rhythmical structures, vocal harmonies and phrasing are also fairly consistent throughout the album. Intentional or not, with one or two notable exceptions (e.g. the bouncy, chugging The Clock), these are the kind of songs that could easily play in the background without demanding much direct attention, yet at the same time affect the mood from underneath, rather like an “invisible deck” in fact.

So while it is heartening to see that The Rogers Sisters have not fallen into the trap of commercialism, choosing instead to explore and expand their musical horizons, I wouldn’t go so far as to label their latest work an ‘opus’ as they have done ever so modestly in their bio. Instead, it’s simply a document (and a worthwhile one at that) of a band that’s continuing to find and define their musical path and refusing to simply blend in with the scenery. 

Anja McCloskey

Sam Brown Ukulele & Voice EP Pod ★★½

After fifty odd years of glorious obscurity and ridicule (…turned out nice again, eh?), the ukulele is in perilous danger of becoming the must-have instrument de jour. Latest to the fray comes Britain’s own Sam Brown, who will already be familiar to many from her past chart flirtations like the hit single Stop! or from her role as first-call singer for Joos Holland’s Rhythm & Blues Orchestra. Certainly the title Ukulele & Voice, 5 Songs… has a certain Ronseal charm, and the fact that each of those five songs features minimal, stripped-down arrangements could not be construed as deception. Sadly, this is both the EP’s weakness and its strength. On the plus side, the nakedness of the intimate recording lovingly showcases the beauty of Sam Brown’s voice and brings the listener that much closer to the singer. Then again, the inability to give a standard performance is, more than likely, etched into Brown’s very DNA, but the ukulele in itself rather lacks the tonal richness and dynamic range to match. Neither is Brown’s particular specimen — an Ovation model by the look of the sleeve — the most mellifluous example of the breed.

Coming back to the positives, the songs themselves are strong. The uke and Brown’s whistled solo give I’ll Be Here a convincing swing-era vibe, while Kiss Of Love, a co-write with Joos Holland, is a sumptuous blues lament that would probably sound fantastic if backed by a talented band. For bonus points, Void makes an attempt to apply the ukulele in a novel manner, taking an arpeggio approach rather than the usual strummed chords, and this blends well with a mournful Celtic-tinged melody. Elsewhere, Away With The Faeries may well have escaped from some unheard of Broadway musical — Brown’s very own Hushabye Mountain — and closer Over The Moon evokes an authentic Cole Porter/Sammy Kahn ‘golden age of the ukulele’ mood.

On balance, however, the EP’s detractions simply out-weigh its merits. Perhaps the sleeve gives the game away; opening the gatefold reveals the completion of the title with “…an afternoon at Dad’s house, in January,” and suddenly the truth becomes clear that these are just a few tracks chucked down on tape for a giggle after a family lunch. Then the nagging thought of ‘wouldn’t it have been nice to hear these songs arranged with a bit more care?’ begins to crystallise. With a harmony here and parallel ukulele part there, this could have been twice the achievement and one is left to conclude with C—, could do better. The suspicion is that this is primarily a disc for die-hard fans and completists. Those simply looking for an introduction to Sam Brown’s talents would be better off getting her new Very Best Of. Likewise, those simply wishing to sample the charms of a uke in the hands of a talented singer would be better off looking elsewhere. However, for those specifically wanting to sample Sam Brown’s live uke revues in the comfort of their own homes, this EP will certainly fit the bill.

Trevor Raggatt
Holly Throsby
On Night
Woo Me!
★★★½

Perhaps as a response to a bombastic, punishing age, these post-millennial years have seen a resurgence of interest in quiet, meditative albums. These records, made equally by male and female artists, may be personal or political (or both), narrative or impressionistic (or both), but they share a number of distinctive characteristics. Unashamedly acoustic, fragile, spare and intimate, they’re a little bit country and more than a little bit folk, whilst colouring outside the lines of both genres. The most effective of these records, however, use their quietness strategically. Recognising the value of restraint, they conceal layers of emotion under their apparently serene surfaces, forging a reflective space for the listener and sometimes inspiring fervent, devoted followings as a result. But these records should never be confused with easy listening; they function instead as a confident rejoinder to the bluster and hype of the contemporary mainstream music scene.

At its best, On Night, the debut album from Sydney shopgirl turned singer-songwriter Holly Throsby, achieves this feat. Reminiscent of Kathryn Williams and Beth Orton, but with a gentle, distinctive Australian twang to her vocals, Throsby has been forging a solid reputation in her native land and elsewhere, playing shows with such neo-folk luminaries as Joanna Newsom, Devendra Banhart and Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy. Recorded in producer Tony Dupe’s house up on Saddleback Mountain in New South Wales (with the windows open for added atmosphere), Throsby’s tales of rue and relationships are, for the most part, poignant and well observed. The instrumentation is typically sparse — acoustic guitar, a dash of cello and piano — forcing Throsby’s sleepy-sounding voice right up front, making even her more self-consciously poetic lyrical flights sound conversational. Constructed from a limited but effective palette of recurrent motifs (birds, dogs, references to time), the result is a record preoccupied by the challenges of sustaining a relationship through the day or night.

Whilst a couple of tracks do veer into inconsequenceaility, even after repeated listens, there are several highlights. Opener We’re Good People But Why Don’t We Show It? juxtaposes two lovers’ good intentions with disturbing references to “dead birds on the stairwell” and “the violence when we met”. Some Nights Are Long is a truly great song about confusion, with the narrator caught between the desire to “make up my mind and then want to change it,” to “order my days and then rearrange them! It’s followed later by Some Days Are Long, in which the uncertainty has been replaced with resolve and the narrator bravely attempts to equate love with emancipation: “I’ll work while I’m still young / Not to hold you down but to let you go.”

Throsby’s songs move through diverse moods with considerable grace and skill. Despite its lovely wry opening (“I get home after one and the dog looks drunk”), Don’t Be Howling becomes a quietly desperate plea to be left alone. In contrast, As The Night Dies is touchingly resigned, offering a frank and undorned response to a relationship’s demise: “Is it too much for you? / Is it? / Well alright”. The narrator anticipates “coffeepots calling / and the sunrise” and is imbued with tentative hope for the new day. This is where the original 2004 Australian release ended, but the European edition is bolstered by bonus track The Dark taken from the same recording sessions. With or without it, On Night is an engaging album that draws you into its hushed and measured atmosphere. It may require a little more verve to truly distinguish it from the crowd, but it’s a promising debut and one that marks Throsby out as an artist to watch.

Be Your Own PET
Be Your Own PET
XL Recordings
★★★

Following their much-hyped debut single Damn Damn Leash — said by some typically over-zealous in-the-knows to be the Teenage Kicks for the ringtone generation — was never going to be an easy task for Nashville under-agers Be Your Own PET, a teen tearaway foursome fronted by temperamental platinum blonde Jemina Pearl. A harsh and uncompromising 112 seconds of telling parents precisely where to go, ...Leash left many an unsuspecting audience utterly breathless, and now, three more singles down the line, there are questions to be answered. Does the sheer white-knuckle exhilaration of the singles ride the course of a full-length album? Have they mellowed and skulked into the commercial pop-punk void vacated by No Doubt in the wake of Gwen Stefani’s solo exploits and baby making? More importantly, have they ruined it all by rush releasing an album to crest their wave of hype?

To these ears, the band are guilty on all counts, though perhaps less so on the last; Be Your Own PET stakes its place on happy ground that’s somewhere between their punk/hardcore influences and mainstream accessibility in a similar vein to Pretty Girls Make Graves’ The New Romance (2003). There are some glorious pop moments, most notably on the recent single Adventure — an excitable, urgent and brief sonic workout on which Jemina’s vocals float between the anthemic and cutey — and, like Stefani, Pearl is certainly skilled in the art of voice control. She almost even breaks into a ballad on October, First Account, though it’s not your usual sopfest, boasting the stirring lyric “we cut ourselves open a hundred times but we’ve not run out of ammo yet”, but is still surprisingly buoyant and uplifting. But crass juvenilia is pretty much the order of the day elsewhere; Bog, for example, is a catchy little ditty about drowning a boyfriend’s dog in the toilet.

When the melody is clear and the vocals less screamy, Be Your Own PET are masters of their trade. It’s a pity then that this rather excludes the majority of the album — too many songs are fairly indistinguishable, all with nonsensical lyrics and little in the way of a tune. So whilst there is no denying their fresh and fiery outlook on songs like Bunk Trunk Skunk (in which Jemina declares “I’m an independent motherfucker”), the extent to which expressing their “attitude” has compromised the quality of the album is questionable indeed. Be Your Own PET is not a bad start by any stretch of the imagination, but there’s no escaping the feeling that, had the opportunity to record an album come at a slightly later point in the band’s career, the result would have been more accomplished and consistent. A brighter future awaits.

Robbie de Santos
How often do we see overused phrases like “a stunning debut from a truly original new talent”? And how often does it in fact refer to a rehashing, albeit an accomplished one, of whatever is the flavour of the moment? It’s rare enough to happen across something that really strikes you as being original, let alone taking you somewhere you’ve never quite been before, but this eponymous debut recording (it’s not an ‘album’ as such, more a collection of demos) by Lily Fraser may just be one of those happy exceptions.

Necessarily, then, it’s something of an arduous task to pick out suitable comparators for the purpose of describing the music. Broad and sweeping statements are precluded and more targeted comments may only reflect an instant or two. In one lyrical section, the phrasing recalls Fish’s unusual stream of consciousness scanning — but this is no Marillion album; in another, there’s a hint of Siouxsie Sioux — but this is no post-punk proto-Goth; in another still, the carefully deployed theatrics and production resemble Freddy Mercury’s more whimsical moments — but this is certainly not A Night At The Opera. Enough befuddled reviewer excuses you say? Well then, if compare we must, the readiest benchmark that comes to mind is Kate Bush; not primarily because Fraser shares that auteur’s fragile but powerful upper register and falsetto, but more the inventiveness she infuses into her four-minute dysfunctional psycho-drama. That said, the vocal performances throughout are uniformly stunning, swooping down from an angelic choir into a dark, veneful siren in the space of just a few notes.

The unusual mix of instruments certainly helps to set the tone. Magical washes of harp and haunting cello create an ominous musical subtext, particularly on tracks like Exposed where the two instruments are played in a manner that could only be referred to as riffing. Urgency is also found in opener Shout It Out with its dance-based rhythms and Fraser’s insistent vocal setting out a manifesto for what is to come. It’s as if communicating her thoughts is a psychological imperative, not just a collection of ditties. Man To Man presents an ironic hymn to the glorious sadness of low self-esteem and the futility of seeking real significance in meaningless sexual encounters, while Beautiful Life restores the yang to the previous yin by showing that even in life’s shady undergrowth lies beauty and value. About You introduces an air of melodrama, with a 1930s matinee idol introduction setting the tone for a scathing attack on the stunted emotions of certain men, while Disagree and It’s You echo the sombre danse macabre. The juxtaposition of moods seen with the warm, meditative Which One Am I? — a slice of bluesy, Gothic folk à la All About Eve — and Old Devil Shine, which spins a cautionary noir yarn, its timeless mood contrasting with unsettling gramophone-textured vocal sections, is undeniably affecting.

Impending tragedy and Victorian melodrama are very much the order of the day with Fraser, and the sheer depth and quality of the recording is little short of breathtaking. On the basis of these first though hardly tentative steps, it is clear that she and her unconventional blend of simultaneously engaging and disturbing sounds are close to creating a Kick Inside for the 21st Century.

Trevor Raggatt

Corinne Bailey Rae

It seems that writing about Corinne Bailey Rae without throwing in the names of every legendary black singer since recording began is the reviewer’s equivalent of eating a jam doughnut without licking your lips. Record company hyperbole is something we’ve come to expect with high profile launches of new artists, but comparisons aside, the buzz surrounding Bailey Rae is largely on her own merits. Her Like A Star EP (the title track of which fittingly opens the album) has been floating around since last November, garnering interest on both sides of the Atlantic. Domestically at least, this was mainly aroused on the back of a last minute appearance on Later With Jools Holland in the place of an unwell Sinéad O’Connor. It’s inter-
If an artist’s output can truly be taken as an expression of their psychological landscape, the furnishings inside Ms Davies’ head may be lush and velvet but they are certainly deep crimson and black. Songs For The Boy Who Wouldn’t Read Rilke is the second of a pair of limited edition EPs from the London-based singer who recently signed to the humorously named Folkwít stable. Hers is a dark muse, embroiled in swirling currents of brooding mystery. Like its predecessor Long Day, much of the music found on ...Rilke is reminiscent of the more sombre and sepulchral elements of goth-folkies All About Eve. On a soft cushion of acoustic guitars blended with echo-drenched piano and heady flourishes of cello, Davies’ mournful vocals intone the agonies of the less illuminated reaches of the human soul, the pain of a blues singer’s Weltenschmerz filtered through the spy-glass of a gothic spirit; these are deeply affecting tone poems.

The Heart Is A Lonesome Hunter drips with loss and regret, with Davies’ sparse piano joining plaintive cello and acoustic guitar as the intensity racks up before the song inches toward its slow and exquisite petit mort. Bury Me explores love both unattained and unattainable, the richness of Davies’ vocal perfectly conveying the song’s emotion, sweeping up to a pure but fleeting ecstasy on the higher ranges. At first, Crave appears to set the sepulchral tone aside with its gentle chiming introduction, but the dissonant vocal lines soon drag us back to the realisation that perhaps all is not quite right with the world. The track also allows Davies to flex her multi-instrumentalist muscles as she drifts subtle flute lines over the refrain as if to mock the intensity below. Closing number It’ll Get Said begins with a slow, twisted variation on what could possibly be the James Bond theme, but the mood is ripped apart by squalling, distorted electric guitar. At certain points, Davies sounds uncannily like All About Eve’s Julianne Regan, while the guitar sounds recall those of the band’s Tim Bricheno.

Both the Long Day and ...Rilke EPs come dressed in sumptuous, handmade paper jackets fastened with dusky wine-coloured ribbon — the product of the auteur’s own porcelain fair hand. This deeply romantic yet somehow archaic dressing is completely appropriate for the music that lies within its embrace. And while the songs work well within the EP format, if their appeal is to last the distance of a full-length album, more dynamics and light/shade interplay is needed. As it is, this short-form offering provides a deeply lush landscape in which the listener can totally immerse themselves. Those who have a nervous disposition need not enquire within, but for listeners whose hearts are made of darker, sterner stuff, there is much here to admire.

**Trevor Raggatt**

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**Joan Baez**

**Bowery Songs**

** Proper  ★★★**

Live albums are notoriously contentious; allowing the artist freedom to digress at will and maybe even include some unexpected or long awaited treats, such release carry with them a great responsibility. We music fans are a ravenous bunch, each gifted with the ability to comprise our own perfect setlist, should said artist ever stumble upon our rambling message board postings. Most artists, however, show no regard for our unique talents, the live release serving only as a greatest hits showcase with somewhat wobblier vocals. This could never be said of Joan Baez though. Forty plus years into her career, she has compiled a live set that it is both expansive and timely, with more than a passing nod to requests from her fans.

Bowery Songs is her first live disc in a decade, recorded the night after the US re-elected George Bush in 2004 at New York’s Bowery Ballroom. The context obviously informs the evening’s song selection, nowhere more so than on Steve Earle’s Christmas In Washington (“It’s Christmastime in Washington / The Democrats rehearsed / Gettin’ into gear for four more years / Things not gettin’ worse”), but then politics has been the foundation of her entire career and as such this is typical, if reliable, Baez fare. Instead, the heart of the album undoubtedly lies in her menacing rendition of Natalie Merchant’s Motherland, which Baez imbues with an almost apocalyptic sense of loss. It makes you wonder what sort of album she could make if she stepped out of her comfort zone a little more often.

In addition to the more recent material, fans are treated to four oft-requested but never before recorded songs, most notably Jerusalem — another Steve Earle track — that concludes proceedings on a rousing note. Baez is a remarkable conduit for both old and new songwriting talent, making classics like Joe Hill (sung by Baez at Woodstock) sound ever relevant and the newer material seem like it’s long been part of her repertoire.

This is at least her eighth live album and, as is the theme with her live releases, it functions as a snapshot in time. For a more comprehensive record of what Baez can really do as a performer, check out From Every Stage (1976). For the time being, how-
ever, this is a solid collection of songs that really only hints at her greatness.  

Matthew Hall

Enya

Amarantine

Warner Bros.

★★★★

The trio that is Enya, fronted and personified by Irish songstress Eithne Ni Bhraonain, needs no introduction. From 1987's The Celts, to 2000's A Day Without Rain, Enya have carved out a unique musical niche that has generated fans from every corner of the globe, and, it seems, an equal number of critics. It certainly appears in vogue to dismiss Eithne and her songwriting partners Roma and Nicky Ryan as New Age fluff, constantly recycled nonsense that's suited only for muzak and bookshop tannoy. But while some of us chuckle at the hint of truth therein, such a sweeping rebuttal is woefully inaccurate. The rank and file of Enya fanhood may be no place for an indie snob, but the sheer popularity of their music is no accident. Their unique orchestrations unabashedly create pure moods that are perfect for practically any occasion. That they are also about as inoffensive as a slice of white bread doesn't hurt sales either. But whilst there is nothing remotely challenging about the music of Enya, there is a certain something to savour. Something familiar and comforting like a warm house at Christmas and reassuringly safe like a cup of herbal tea.

Predictably then, Amarantine is unlikely to disappoint Eithne's legions of fans. In keeping with its title, which refers to a mythical eternal flower, it's a longer and more satisfying album than A Day Without Rain and is subtly different from her previous releases. Abandoning the trademark Gaelic lyrics for a dabble into Japanese was certainly brave, yet works surprising well. Simiregusa is a striking blend of Japanese lyrics and ethereal vocals evoking visuals of geisha and white cherry blossoms, and may very well be the most innovative thing the trio has done in a decade. So much so that it nearly even manages to trump Amarantine's crowning achievement — that of Roma Ryan's creation of the new language Loxian, a tongue inspired by the works of Tolkien, that appears on three of the album's twelve tracks. Inevitably, by virtue of its indiscernibility, the use of Loxian adds a little more to the fantasy and mystery of just what Eithne is singing about; those of us versed in more mundane languages, however, will just listen to those tracks as we always have with the Gaelic ones, enjoying the sound of the words rather than the actual poetry.

To be fair, a higher expectation would have been folly. The trio have found a working formula and it's one that they pretty much stick to throughout. At times it can be overwhelmingly obvious — for example, It's In The Rain sounds remarkably like China Roses from The Memory Of Trees (1995), the title track is practically a carbon copy of the massive chart hit Only Time from A Day Without Rain and The River Sings harkens back to 1987's often-sampled Bouddica. But despite the formulaic nature of the album, fans of Enya would expect little else, nor, it seems, do they really care to. Amarantine may do nothing to win new fans, but its soothing and comfortable sounds will at worst retain the masses who have come to love Enya for those overlapping vocals and synthesized swells. And since A Day Without Rain was the world's best-selling album in 2001, perhaps comfort is really the point.  

Loria Near

Santa Dog

Belle de Jour EP

Self-released

★★★★

The Belle de Jour EP is the third release from Bristol-based indie-pop hopefuls Santa Dog (where did they get that name?) in little over a year, and it's certainly a likeable offering that demonstrates a definite progression from their previous EP. Released in October 2005, the Chemical EP suffered from a flat production job that all but buried the vocal in the mix, yet contained the requisite amount of shoegazing introspection to maintain a degree of appeal. No such regrets to be found on this follow-up, however; Belle de Jour sparkles with a clarity of sound that allows the guitars to jangle as intended. This pleasing development shows a clear and confident step forward in the intervening six months and suggest that the band are growing in confidence. So whilst their indie intensity stays intact, the sound and delivery presents a more accomplished package.

Each member has their own role to play and does so with aplomb. Jojo Harper's bass drives proceedings along, effectively melding with genuinely scary looking drummer Martin Maidment's rhythms, while guitarist Rob Williams liberally layers jangly arpeggios and riffs throughout, his occasional squalls suggesting that his influences are wider than the Squire/Marr/Butler triumvirate to encompass rather less textbook sources like Steve Howe or Bill Nelson. Perhaps their greatest assets, however, are those they exploit most effectively here — good tunes and an even better singer in Rowena Dugdale, whose vocals are just sufficiently estuary to perfectly suit the music, with more than a touch of Kirsty MacColl around the edges. Dugdale pitches her performance well, giving a sense of strength and also vulnerability.

Musically, the title track skirts pleasingly along the perimeter of Belle & Sebastian territory, occasionally adding in shades of Teenage Fanclub, The Divine Comedy and the aforementioned Electric Landlad. It weaves an all-too-relevant story of finding significance in meaningful relationships in a society in which we are systematically brainwashed by daytime TV and reality gameshow banalities. Elsewhere, Rosa is a parade of sunny summer hooks that risks being rained on by an undercurrent of sadness and desperation, while Pop-Coloured is a power chord confection that visits The Boo Radleys via Franz Ferdinand with its pounding snare driving along the jaunty, choppy guitars. Finally, 1000 Cranes brings things to a close with a gloomy yet luminous evocation of lost love in post-industrial Britain. On this evidence, it seems that Dugdale and co. are on a serious upward trajectory, and if things continue apace, this Dog may yet have its day.  

Trevor Raggatt
Picture the scene: it’s the UK in the early Eighties and, bruised from the onslaught that was punk, the mainstream musical scene is on the cusp of gentrification — the time of the dandy is at hand. When Sonic Youth released their eponymous debut in 1982, the UK charts were dominated by the likes of Bucks Fizz, Dollar, Tight Fit and Charlene, all of whom, in their own way, made a success of their fifteen minutes, but are unlikely to be spoken of in the same reverential hush afforded to Kim Gordon and her atonal chums when musos sit down to discuss the popular canon.

By 1983, Duran Duran would be all over the airwaves like a rash and English pop would enter its wilder-ness years, culminating in the hegemony of Stock, Aitken and Waterman. In New York, Madonna flirted with a real band and pranced about in leotards (proving that what goes around...), before crossing the Borderline and going on Holiday. More of her later. Time has repeatedly shown that mediocrity often precipitates revolt, and while Sonic Youth cannot be called upon to shoulder full responsibility for what happened next, their coming together, and subsequent success, influenced the greatest of the Eighties guitar bands and the Nineties grunge-athon. They didn’t so much storm the barricades as sneak round their edges and lay the enemy flat with their own walls of dissonance; this wasn’t revolution, it was renaissance.

Twenty-five years after its initial release, Universal are reissuing not only their debut mini-album, but also their 1988 off-the-wall oddity The Whitey Album (recorded under the affectionate moniker Ciccone Youth) and Thurston Moore’s 1995 solo effort Psychic Hearts, in preparation for a new album in the summer — all come remastered with extra studio and live tracks. Leaving aside the argument that a remastered Sonic Youth album rather contradicts their rationale, the recent recycling of art-rock/pop and post-post-punk in the forms of Franz Ferdinand and The Strokes et al. is an ideal time to revisit the daddies
of the anti-melody scene. After all, without them, it's highly unlikely that students would have anything decent to get drunk to.

The good news is that Sonic Youth sounds just as contemporary now as it must have sounded young, fresh and new in 1982. It's not a welcoming sound, however. You don't listen to Sonic Youth for relief from the world; this music is a relentless test of your mental capacity, an extended middle finger to your ears and melodic sensibilities. This is the sound of musicians building whole cities from concrete slabs of bass and jackboot guitars, extending jams on one note for five minutes before firing up the Sherman tanks and blowing structure and sense into smithereens. On Burning Spear, Moore intones “I'm not afraid to say I'm scared” and you would do well to admit the same, or turn the CD off and go listen to The Carpenters. I Dreamed I Dreamed is a slow Motörhead bass riff over a scattering of dissonant guitar notes and random, half-whispered Gordon vocals that would give Martin Luther King a sleepless night. The extended outro to I Don't Want To Push It is a torture device; loop it, turn it up to eleven and watch your victim beg for clemency within ten minutes. The Good & The Bad picks up where it leaves off and goes on. And on. And on. As a teenager in a dark basement club off Bleecker Street with 200 of your mates and no lectures tomorrow, it must have approached aural nirvana (a term I use not wholly without irony). Emerging into a Manhattan morning, the world would have been a different place.

Only five tracks long, Sonic Youth had 'cult' written all over it. Creativity and experimentalism of this quality is never meant to last, but should implode as quickly as each of the compositions grabs you by the throat and screams for attention. That Sonic Youth are still a potent force is testament to their ability to ride the edge of commercial success and critical acclaim and find succour in both. Nothing in their latter (and large) catalogue comes close to the exuberance and 'couldn't give a fuck' attitude of this debut. Listening to it from start to finish is like being stabbed slowly. By someone you love.

The Whitey Album was the product of a collaboration between Sonic Youth and Minutemen bassist Mike Watt. If the Youth's catalogue to this date had cemented their place in the art-rock heavens, this album, released under the name Ciccone Youth and named in honour of The Beatles' double from 1968, proved that art for art's sake was still a viable proposition in the blossoming, style-over-substance MTV world. Short pieces (to call them 'songs' would be stretching it) with little structure, less melody and lots of humour, The Whitey Album was the arch-experimenters freed from even the loose strictures of their 'day job' and deciding to go play in the traffic. Pity the traffic — this is disco for the disturbed, with techno rhythms and noise that would ably soundtrack Orwell's 1984 or perhaps a darker Blade Runner. It's dystopian pop.

Me & Jill/Hendrix Cosby sounds like someone's let Hunter S Thompson man the decks after a raid on the local pharmacy. Macbeth is a circular road trip at 33.3 rpm, four flat tyres and a Casio keyboard. It might be better to be stoned when listening, but I couldn't really say. Where any semblance of song pokes its head above the parapet, it's a cover, and finds Ciccone Youth at their funniest. Madonna's Burnin' Up is given the out-of-tune treatment, cleverly mixing the original chorus with Moore's laconic drawl. And when Gordon later raps through Robert Palmer's Addicted To Love, it's almost respectful yet stupidly hilarious.

Other tracks that stand out are Platoon II, Two Cool Rock Chicks Listening To New! and March Of The Ciccone Robots, all titles that indicate the playful levels to which Ciccone Youth descended in their efforts to massage the boundaries. The Nineties would see Sonic Youth move to a major label and release ever-more mainstream albums, albeit retaining artistic control. In this way, they would expand their fanbase whilst maintaining their role as the spearhead of late 20th Century art-noise. The Whitey Album, their affectionate lampooning of the music they originally revolted against, stands as the last time they could conceivably be called 'alt-' and not be accused of hypocrisy.

So, Sonic Youth — are they (not very) melodic masturbation of the highest order, or ground breaking experimentalism on a scale not seen since Schoenberg? Actually, they're both. This is music that marries the requirements of no-wave New Yorkers in need of a noise fix, with the band's genre-busting lust for creativity amid respectful nods to The Stooges, Velvet Underground and contemporaries like Joy Division, Dinosaur Jr and My Bloody Valentine. Or, as a friend and fan told me when I asked for his opinion, it's Kim Gordon on stage, playing the bass and making a noise. Sometimes that's enough.

Paul Woodgate
The Innocence Mission are the kind of band that can make you feel like you’re the only person who knows them. It’s hard to believe that the first time I heard them was once upon a Saturday afternoon in the dim and distant late Eighties playing live on Radio One, of all places. Then promoting their debut album, it seems they swiftly dispensed with playing the game in terms of conventional promotion and so forth, and pre-internet at least, they were certainly an elusive bunch. Every now and then an album just seemed to magically appear from their world of love and beauty. I felt quite selfish about it actually, like they were my own secret band. But they even made albums that I didn’t know about; such lovely mystery! For years, I thought that main songwriter Karen and guitarist Don were brother and sister when they are in fact Mrs. and Mr. Peris. Nowadays though, even they have a website, a fact that just doesn’t seem right somehow. And now, presumably still riding on the tidal wave of critical acclaim they’ve received in recent years — not least for 2003’s heavenly Befriended — they’re reissuing a fully remastered version of their 1999 cult classic Birds Of My Neighborhood.

So while I was quite possibly the only person to ever buy a copy of the original, now any Tom, Dick or Harriet will be able to. Bah!

But you can’t keep something this good to yourself forever. Birds... is a deceptively simple-sounding collection with minimal overdubs, the couple joined only by longtime Mission-ary and double bassist, Mike Bitts. Karen has something of a Marmite voice; some may love it while others may find it impossible to get past and that’s fair enough — her sweetness makes Melanie Safka sound like a member of Slipknot! But in my opinion, hers is a gorgeous and heartrending talent, and never more so the latter than on a deeply personal song like July, perhaps the most explicit reference to a difficult time in the Peris’ marriage when they had serious problems in conceiving a much longed-for child (something that has since been happily resolved). The seasonal details here, of snow and rain, of nature, trees and lakes are vividly realised. When Karen sings “we will walk on a hill / Red hats and blue coats and everything still”, you are all but right there with them on that cold snowy day.

The one cover version, a rendition of John Denver’s Follow Me, is so exquisite that it will quite possibly haunt you to the end of your days; frankly, it turns me to jelly every time I hear it and is a pertinent reminder that Denver was a far better writer than people give him credit for. Spiritual and childlike, mysterious and sparse, Birds Of My Neighborhood is too special an album to simply be one that gets away so be glad for a second chance to own it. Celebrity fans Joni Mitchell, Sufjan Stevens and David Gray have raved about The Innocence Mission, I’m raving about them and you will rave about them too, but it’s a very hushed and churchlike kind of raving so ssssh! That way, they may even grow to feel like your very own secret band too.

Kevin Hewick

Electrelane

The three E’s — Envelopes, (Saint) Etienne and Electrelane. These artists are similar, not just musically, but because it takes an acquired taste to like them enough to listen to their albums the whole way through. Originally released in 2001 and now getting a well deserved reissue, Rock It To The Moon has had plenty of time to grow on me, but it’s quite likely that after only fourteen minutes and six seconds, when only two tracks have played, any mainstream indie lover will be fitting on the floor, calling for it to stop, PLEASE stop!

Personally, I love it. I can’t get enough of shrieking strings placed randomly over beat after beat after beat. I love how music like this can burst away from its field of destruction and jump into a techno dance worthy of David Brent. I love the demented circus sample at the end of Long Dance, and how Gabriel, the track sequenced directly after, sounds entirely different. So different, that if it weren’t for the loop of fuzzed out voices in the background, you’d be forgiven for thinking it was a different band.

Electrelane were relatively young when this album was recorded, but it doesn’t show. Rightfully, the album should have propelled every member to stand in the clouds amongst Air and Ladytron, looking down on the bands that aspire to be them. I can only assume this didn’t happen because of the indie (and predominantly male) ‘uprising’ that occurred at the same time; they just weren’t given the time.

Of course with every album that relies on this form of music, there is a point when even the most hardcore electro fan has to say, “enough is enough” and turn the volume down. There are days when you just don’t want to listen to what is essentially one album-length song that flips and does cartwheels all over your ears. But there are also days when you just itch for something that can do that, people who don’t aspire to live during the Romantic era or to make your ears bleed, and for those days, Electrelane are your band. Tiffany Daniels
From Joni Mitchell to the McGarrigles, Sarah McLachlan to kd lang, Canada has produced a significant number of accomplished and influential female singer-songwriters. Mitchell is the undisputed foremother, of course, setting the bar almost ludicrously high in terms of innovation, musicianship and lyrical dexterity. But the artists who have followed in her wake have also made their own distinctive contributions to Canada’s musical mosaic. Though extremely diverse and individual, their work is characterised by emotional fearlessness, a willingness to experiment and an often-breathtaking ability to fuse elements of pop, folk, rock and jazz in creative ways — sometimes in the space of a single song.

Jane Siberry is one such artist. Blessed with a playful sense of humour, a protean voice that can both soar and confide, and the ability to turn a song about a missing cow into an aching expression of loss, she has a devoted following in Canada and elsewhere. In the UK, however, she has seldom received the recognition she richly deserves. In recent years, her decision to release new material only through her own Sheeba label has not helped to raise her profile, and when kd lang covered two of her songs on her 2004 covers album of classic Canadian songcraft, Hymns Of The 49th Parallel, British listeners could perhaps have been forgiven for asking “Jane who”? For the uninitiated, then, this two-disc, thirty-track retrospective (first released in 2002) serves as the perfect introduction to an idiosyncratic and endlessly rewarding body of work.

Drawn mainly from Siberry’s early 1980s folk-based releases, her experimental No Borders Here, The Speckless Sky and The Walking trilogy, 1989’s Bound By The Beauty and 1993’s When I Was A Boy, the choice of material on the first disc could not be bettered. Given the extraordinary level of quality control, it’s almost churlish to pick favourites, but the inviting piano ballad In The Blue Light, the spry Red High Heels, the unearthly The Walking (& Constantly), the hymnal The Lobby and the rapt Bound By The Beauty are all particularly captivating expressions of Siberry’s unique gifts. The disc also gives a clear sense of her creative development, from her spare apprentice material to her exhilarating experiments with studio trickery throughout the 1980s.

This is not to suggest that the compilation follows a slavishly chronological path through Siberry’s work, however. Instead, several thematically connected songs from different periods are linked together to form mini cycles and suites. Thus, Bessie (from her 1996 album, Teenager) is paired with its 1981 ‘prequel’ The Mystery At Ogwen’s Farm to tell the tale of a flying bovine from two contrasting perspectives. Placed side by side, the songs sound especially striking, the former a buoyant acoustic strum full of Chagall-esque imagery, the latter an exquisite lament in which the narrator of Bessie features as a mere bit player. The same trick occurs on the second disc, whereupon Siberry’s classic Mimi On The Beach is followed by the live recording Mimi Speaks, a cheeky spoken-word piece in which the objectified title character is finally given the chance to “have [her] say”. Such thoughtful sequencing reveals Siberry’s heartening commitment to the fullest possible development of her stories and characters, and is a valuable feature of this compilation.

Siberry trades immaculate harmonies with lang on Calling All Angels, one of her best-loved songs and also one of her most beautiful, pitched in some galaxy midway between despair and consolation. Yet Siberry does not fear bold exuberance; The Life Is The Red Wagon is a dose of happiness, its “you pull for me... I pull for you” refrain serving as the ultimate antidepressant.

The second disc is patchier and gives the impression that Siberry’s work has become somewhat less compelling in recent years. There are, of course, some heavenly moments; the sublime, minutely-detailed pop of Mimi and the skewed piano ballads Goodnight Sweet Pumpkinhead and Barkis Is Willin’. However, the bizarre Peony is a piece of woeful, substandard experimenta, and the best that can be said of her treatments of traditional material such as All Through The Night and The Water Is Wide is that they’re pretty. But “pretty” feels like a considerable letdown after her complex and daring earlier work, and there are times when these songs veer perilously close to schmaltz. It’s left to her closing cycle of Map Of The World tracks — presented together in sequence for the first time here with a new (and not very satisfying) Part IV — to regain some of the lost momentum.

Siberry shares with Kate Bush an ability to combine unconventional lyrical subject matter with intricate, densely layered yet accessible melodies and arrangements. The work of both also expresses an unabashed femininity and an emotional openness that can sound surprisingly close to toughness. The relative paucity of rarities or new material on this collection means that it has less to offer long-time devotees of Siberry’s music. But Rhino have done a typically impeccable job on it, and it will undoubtedly inspire those new to her work, and leave them eager to hear more. Alex Ramon
Emm Gryner
Songs Of Love & Death
Dead Daisy ★★★★

For her second album of covers, Canadian self-made woman Emm Gryner once again avoids the pointless celeb karaoke approach of some of her peers, but where 2001’s Girl Versions lovingly emasculated songs by everyone from Thrush Hermit to Blur via Ozzy Osbourne – an eclectic enough selection to rival even Tori Amos’ Strange Little Girls, released the same year but with ten times the marketing budget – Songs Of Love & Death is a nationalistic nod to the Irish. More contemporary than other Irish covers albums (e.g. Sinéad O’Connor’s Sean-Nós Nua, The Corrs’ Home) and with little in the way of traditional Celtic instrumentation, Songs… finds Gryner stripping back each song to its emotional core and working up from there.

Kicking in with chiming guitar and harpsichord arpeggios, Forget Georgia sounds for all the world like a long-lost classic Pretenders single, though is actually an obscure cut from Something Happens. It’s not hard to see why the song’s picked up some airplay in the more discerning corners of national radio, but there are finer moments elsewhere. Gryner’s versions of Running Back, a track from Thin Lizzy’s 1976 album Jailbreak, and The Corrs’ Breathless both demonstrate the panache of her deconstruction. Both are sheared to the bone as tender piano ballads wracked with the true desperation of the lyrics. Likewise, Ash’s Shining Light benefits from the minimalist treatment; in Gryner’s hands, the disposable punk-pop anthem morphs into a tender hymn to love. Dana Feder’s achingly beautiful cello counterpoints the vocals and piano, with subtle church organ riffing completing the mystical effect. Deck-chairs & Cigarettes forgoes The Thrills’ Americana stylings in favour of the full Celtic treatment – marching-season pipe and drum backing contrasting deliciously with jangly indie pop.

Perhaps the most obscure and surprising inclusion of the album is Dearth Doom from Celtic rock group Horslips’ seminal disc, The Tain (1974). Quite how the casual listener, unaware of the track’s genesis as centrepiece of a concept-album based on pre-Christian Celtic mythology, will assimilate the lyrical content – Irish hero Cu Chu-lainn taunting the ranks of an army he’s about to slay single-handedly – I couldn’t say, but the electro-pop arrangement with its muted guitar, harpsichord, fuzz bass and distorted vocals is brilliantly compelling nonetheless.

In comparison, Gilbert O’Sullivan’s Nothing Rhymed is the straightest cover on the album, but even here there are quirks in the arrangements; piano-forte mixed with the mbira, an East African thumb piano, makes for an effective instrumental duet. Add to that the jaunty, almost Victoria Wood-like delivery, and its the perfect contrast to what comes next. The measured horror of the Virgin Prunes’ Bau-Dachong is truly chilling; desperate vocals and grotesque sequenced rhythms build to uncover layer after layer of menace. Never has folk legend Kate McGarrigle’s banjo sounded more disturbing. Unquestionably, this is a true tour de force and the record’s emotional climax. Which is great, except that everything thereafter smacks a little of lost momentum. That’s not to say there’s anything wrong with Gryner’s takes on The Undertones’ Julie Ocean, Therapy?’s Nowhere or the much covered traditional Moorlough Shore; it’s just that they’ve a tough act to follow. Of the three, however, Nowhere is the strongest candidate for radio. Divorced from Therapy?’s muscular style, it becomes a likeable acoustic ditty with a Sheryl Crow-ish vocal.

The renaissance of the covers album as a valid expression of artistry is still quite recent, and there’s no doubt that Gryner owes some small debt to the likes of Annie Lennox, Tori Amos and even Cat Power, but Songs Of Love & Death reasserts the wisdom of the old jazz truism that skilful interpretation of song is an art unto itself. It’s to Gryner’s credit, too, that her artistic input extended to playing almost all of the instruments, including the mbira. Following a successful tour of the Emerald Isle and the recent radio adds, here’s hoping a full UK release for this excellent collection can be organised, and soon!

Trevor Raggatt
Hannah Fury
Subterfuge EP
Mellow/Traumatic
★★★★

Self-styled Trauma Queen Hannah Fury has at last shuffled off her musical slumber. It’s been six long years since her unsettling debut album, The Thing That Feels, and three since her last EP. What has she been doing? Well, not losing one iota of her touch for a start; Subterfuge is the most sinister thing to come out of Texas since the Bush Administration, and all the better for it. Kicking off with a deliciously subversive, almost perverse take on The Turtles’ 1969 hit You Showed Me, Fury teasingly twists and plays with the melody and phrasing to great effect. And while it’s not as nakedly ambitious or successful as her gloriously gut-wrenching cover of ABBA’s The Winner Takes It All (from 2001’s sublime Meat Hook EP), it sets up Subterfuge’s overarching ‘love me or else’ theme very nicely indeed.

The sheer intensity of My Next Victim continues this motif, with hell hath no fury lyrics like “you don’t want none of my sugar / you just want that skanky snatch, no offense to her” delivered with an eerie and unwavering focus, its very matter-of-factness recalling Lisa Germano’s ...A Psychopath reverse engineered and seen through an opiate haze. The fabulously titled Girls That Glitter Love The Dark is equally impressive with its From The Choirgirl Hotel-era Tori Amos flourishes and lush, hypnotic multi-tracked vocals. Illuminating couplets like “girls that glitter defile hope / we think that love is just tightening that sad little rope” languish in the mix with a general air of self-destructive obsession.

But perhaps the finest distillation of Fury’s particular brand of musical malaise is the multimedia track, Carnival Justice (The Gloves Are Off) Part II. Whether heard alone or in tandem with Chris Ohlson’s creepy video featuring a pair of custom-made marionettes (The Queen of Hearts and Anathema Rose to their friends), it’s an undeniable spine-tingling experience. So precisely layered are the distorted, whispery vocals, it’s almost as if she were singing in parsetlounge. Needless to say, it’s the kind of song that the religious far right would love to play backwards in fear (hope?) of finding an ode to the devil. Which would be rather silly regardless, because they would then miss out on some of Fury’s best writing to date — “if you think you scored, your vision must be blurred / welcome one and all to the Theatre of the Absurd / mmmmmy heart is like the Moulin Rouge / all lit up in subterfuge” — with all its Jean Genet conjuring dramaturgy.

Whether or not Fury intends a literal interpretation of A Latch To Open’s closing sound effect of an emancipated bird fleeing its prison (and I’m inclined to believe she doesn’t), it’s tempting to see it as something symbolic. A brusque farewell to writer’s block, perhaps. For as wonderful as this enchanting EP undoubtedly is, it’s ostensibly a prelude to a far greater prize; that long-awaited full-length coming later this year. Amen! Alan Pedder

Morningwood
Morningwood
Capitol
★★

The great thing about Morningwood is that you’re left in no doubt when they’re in the vicinity. The New York foursome are loud, glam and put on a spectacular live show, largely helped by the youthful exuberance of their wonderfully christened frontwoman, Chantal Claret. But can they cut it on CD, stripped of their visuals and spontaneity? Well they certainly can’t be criticised for not giving it their best shot. Lead track Ni Rock slaps you upside your head with an in your face rock ’n’ roll tune and a statement of intent, Claret screaming “come on get over it, come on get into it” over crunching riffs before finishing with the battle cry “it starts right now!”

Next, Televisor approaches metal territory with all guns blazing, with Claret’s wailing falsetto oozing brash stomping tune, with aggressive riffs and a hollered bit over the drum break. Similarly, while Take Off Your Clothes may inspire some audience members to do just that at their live shows, here it rips the heart from Smells Like Teen Spirit and renders it simply boring. Body 21 carries on the slip into formulac nonsense, being a semi-dramatic rock tune full of half-baked lyrical clichés like “my body’s 21 but my mind is ageless”. Elsewhere, Easy is all stadium posturing and screeching electric guitar solos, while Babysitter is slightly more restrained and all the better for it. It’s still none too exciting, however.

After all this, New York Girls comes as a nice surprise, more New Wave pop than over the top. The interruptions from riffing guitars and Go! Team-style shambolics sit rather well in the tune and make for a more interesting listen. In fact, it marks the start of a closing trio that trounces the majority of the rest of the album. Everybody Rules is straightforward bouncy pop but with cool singalong bits, while Ride The Lights is a rather surprising Saint Etienne-style, saccharine-coated pedestrian pop song. With more songs like these, Morningwood could yet avoid being put down as a lame one-trick pony. Russell Barker
Spider
The Way To Bitter Lake
Self-released ★★★★

Old wives once foretold that a fever could be cured by wearing around one's neck a spider in a nutshell. In a nutshell, that's poppycock, but many a fetid sweaty furrowed brow could be soothed by a spin of The Way To Bitter Lake, the debut mini-album from Brooklyn-based artist Jane Herships. Quite where she's hiding her other four limbs is anybody's guess, but with Herships less is unquestionably more. She may be yet another Sidewalk Café alumna, having stolen the show at a November 2004 open mic night, but Herships stands out on the antifolk periphery by virtue of having a classically beautiful, bittersweet voice. Some comparisons ring true, but only fleetingly; a first listen brought to mind a less twangy Jill Barber or Victoria Williams, while a second conjured a slightly less deathly Julie Doiron sipping a herbal tea with Nina Nastasia. Then just when you think you might have nailed her down, Herships will gleefully give you the slip.

Opener The Clearing is deceptively textbook, lo-fi finger-picked loneliness; "now is the time to behave" she opines a little mischievously, but the undulating melody and perfectly timed harmonies of Louis Schwadron (who was, until recently, the Polvophonic Spree's French horn supremo) are ecstatically cracked and lovelorn. Don't Be Afraid, I've Just Come To Say Goodbye is what Múm might sound like if they spent less time on their laptops — gorgeous flourishes of flute and Schwadron's horn are woven sparingly through hushed double-tracked vocals, sweetly intimate guitar and unintrusive electric piano. Herships clearly knows a thing or two about subtlety, resisting too the temptation to overegg the lyrics; "and should I beware / your nights and your mares" in particular is devastatingly simple and suggestive. The intriguingly-titled I Don't Know If She Had Any Teeth Because She Never Smiled offers up more of the same, this time coated in black treacle drones, while The Bitter One is blessed with a crisper guitar sound, bolder vocal and weeping, evocative strings.

But it's when Herships plucks in that things get truly exhilarating. The cool countrified lament of Cold Eyes is a long-lost Edith Frost song, circa Telescopic, or at least it shimmers so finely that it very well could be. The prettiness of Maggie's Song For Alice is torn completely asunder by a jagged wedge of electric guitar that at first might seem woefully misjudged, but just ten seconds later may just be the most wonderfully pained Stratocaster solo that's ever pierced your armour. And after the summery stroll of Midnight On The Nile you back into calm, End Song briefly erupts with a quietly fierce farewell, the feedback so thickly caked on that the lyrics are all but obscured and indecipherable. For disambiguation's sake and a handy bit of useless trivia, there are in fact three Bitter Lakes in Herships' native land, and which of them this captivating song suite points to, who really minds? If further fruits of her labour are this truly scrumptious, Herships herself may find the path to success rather well signposted too.

Alan Pedder

Victoria Vox
Victoria Vox & Her Jumping Flea
Obus Music ★★★★

What is it with the ukulele all of a sudden? Not since George Harrison became obsessed with them in the early Nineties has the Hawaiian four-stringed instrument been so in the limelight. One of last year's most memorable singles, Mara Carlyle's Baby Bloodheart, was almost entirely ukulele and voice, and criminally under-rated UK singer-songwriter Sam Brown supplied in her shoes with the, er, Ukulele & Voice EP. First though, Berklee graduate Victoria Vox steps up to the plate with Victoria Vox & Her Jumping Flea, ten deftly woven original compositions and well-chosen covers, some modern, some from the golden age of the uke's post-World War I popularity. For the uninitiated, the 'jumping flea' of the title derives from the literal translation of the Hawaiian. Rest assured, however, that there's no fleas, flies or insects of any kind on Victoria Vox. Since striking out as an independent artist three years ago, she's been plying her engaging brand of acoustic pop the length and breadth of the States, mostly backed by guitar, but since an accident of circumstance introduced her to the uke, she's been slipping it into her live set on an increasingly frequent basis. An entire ukulele album was only a matter of time! Now, to be fair, the uke as an instrument isn't blessed with the broadest of dynamic or tonal ranges, though it is a pleasing sound. However, Vox's consummate skill as arranger and interpreter really pays dividends. So while the uke and vocals take centre stage on all tracks, a sympathetic backing adds texture and depth to each, adding in guitar, bass, cello, vibes, and even toy piano and kazoo.

The album starts off with Ukulele Lady, a cute little novelty song from the ukulele's heyday, written by Broadway composer Gus Kahn, who also had a hand in classics like Dream A Little Dream Of Me, Makin' Whoopie and My Baby Just Cares For Me. It's a charming period piece, with its authentic showtune feel and slide guitar ornament providing the perfect opener. Vox interprets another of Kahn's tunes (Guilty) later on, while the two more recent covers include the Talking Heads' Psycho Killer, gorgeously arranged with cello, and Le Vent Nous Portera by French rock band Noir Desir – better known in the UK because of their singer's involvement in the death of actress Marie Trintignant. It's a beautiful rendition, transporting the listener directly to the narrow streets of Montmartre or the Quartier Latin with its melodica and Hot Club-styled jazz comping. The album's centrepiece, however, is a fantastic medley of Somewhere Over The Rainbow and What A Wonderful World. Here, mellow vibraphone chimes contrast with the staccato ukulele while Vox interweaves and improvises around the melodies, her beautifully pure voice bringing a feeling of innocence and intimacy to the hopeful lyrics – totally beguiling.

Vox is no slouch either when it comes to her own compositions. America tells the lonely tale of being a solo travelling troubadour, while Dreamin' About You (the only song that's simply uke and voice) shows that, for all the rich clarity...
of her vocal, Vox can extend to a more bluesy wail when she wants to. It’s a real testimony to her delivery that other songs like My Darlin’ Beau, Yodelayheehoo and Christmas With You, that might have sounded twee or cloying in less skilful hands, are only ever charming and engaging. Certainly, there are few albums this undeniably enchanting, creating a world of their own around the listener. This is a pleasant world, both forward-looking and back, and indeed, the only real complaint to speak of is that, at little over a half hour of music, it would have been nice to overstay our welcome.

**Trevor Raggatt**

**Amy Ray**

**Daemon**

★★½

You can just see the headlines… INDIGO GIRL IN GARAGE BAND SHOCKER!… and, indeed, Prom may take some fans of the colourful folksy twosome by surprise. For her second solo outing, Amy Ray charges further down the rocky road of 2002’s Stag, casting out the Lilith Fair staples of acoustic guitars, interweaving harmonies and subtle poetics in favour of a straight up, Seventies-tinged garage band ethos. Weighing her musical anchor in the sounds of her youth is certainly appropriate given the over-riding theme of the album – teenage rites of passage, sexual awakenings etc., all as implied by the title – and that’s both the record’s blessing and its curse. Where the Indigo Girls as a unit tend to lavish each song with subtle washes of meaning and texture, Prom, to quote the great philosopher Shrek, simply “don’t have layers.” And whilst this single-minded agenda can be a strength in terms of bringing a common focus and sense of coherence, it sure does wear you down, too often spilling over into one-dimensionality and hammered-home polemic. Fortunately, Ray is too good and experienced a songwriter to render Prom entirely no mouth, all trousers; the subtler songs will stick where the bombast fails.

To her credit, Ray admirably battles her early demons and formative experiences in a way that provides an opportunity for catharsis, particularly where matters of sexuality and the teenage trauma of accepting one’s self are concerned. It’s a shame then that the result is not more insightful and considered. Though she sings of important and invovling topics, they often seem to suffer from an apparently shallow treatment laced with invective, as if she were seeking to shock rather than to enquire and inform. For instance, Rural Faggot might as well be paraphrased as “it’s rough growing up as a young gay man in an isolated, averedly red-neck community. Maybe life would less awkward if you’d lived in Greenwich Village. Yeah!” – and it’s a real pity because elsewhere in the song are a few lines of gorgeous, evocative imagery, and many of the other songs fall at this same hurdle. Ray’s sometimes striking similes and scenes are robbed of any apparent subtext, and therefore pass by all but unregarded.

It must be conceded, however, that even the less effective songs are at least workmanlike, pushing along with a pre-punk sense of purpose and the tunes are perfectly hummable. The album does contain a few real gems too; Driver Education motors along with Farfisa organ motifs burbling in the background, evoking images of American high school life, while Sober Girl recalls Billy Idol’s White Wedding, perhaps as covered by Iggy & The Stooges. Compelling stories of sexual confusion and youthful exploitation are spun on Covered For You and Pennies On The Track, while the uncharacteristically Indigos-esque closer Let It Ring successfully blends acoustic guitars and mandolins with more strident, rockier sounds. Rounding squarely on the intolerance and prejudice shown to the gay community, in particular by the conservative churches in the US and elsewhere, it draws the thematic curtains of the album to an aptly vocal close. **Trevor Raggatt**

**Lisa Loeb**

**The Very Best Of Hip-O**

★★★

Twelve years ago, a little known unsigned singer-songwriter from Dallas redefined what it means to hit the ground running. A rogue release from the Reality Bites soundtrack, her debut single Stay (I Missed You) took off entirely on its own merits, its unadulterated pop archetype and Loeb’s girl next door persona striking a chord with radio listeners and propelling her to the summit of the Billboard Top 100 and peaking at #6 in the UK. Of course, a sparse video directed by Reality Bites star Ethan Hawke didn’t harm its chances, and Loeb was quickly signed to Geffen Records soon after. Her debut album Tails was released the following autumn and quickly went platinum. Although her songwriting has never quite achieved the same tenacity as it did on Stay, Loeb’s skills as a pop singer-songwriter are unmitigated and this career retrospective offers a good mix, albeit with some bias towards her earlier years; twelve of the eighteen selections originate from the first two of her four releases. Sadly, there’s nothing from Catch The Moon (2003), her entertaining album of music aimed at children.

Loeb is best when she tackles darker material, such as Sandalwood’s stark declarations of obsession, the mournful How and the relationship autopsy of Do You Sleep?, which by all rights should have equalled the success of Stay. Her lighter material, such as the minor Stateside hits I Do and Let’s Forget About It and the reggae-lite All Day – Loeb’s contribution to 1998’s The Rugrats Movie, in which she also provided the voice of a newborn baby – manage to hit the marks they should despite being a little less majestic. It’s a credit to her likeability and craft that songs like Bring Me Up would come off on the wrong side of tame if placed in the hands of almost any other artist, while Loeb’s sweet vocals and nebbish lyrical honesty elevate the song above the dreaded MOR mark.

In fact, what is apparent in each of these songs is that Loeb’s personable nature and unflinching truth-telling, even when looming in the face of cliché, has given her a kind of staying power that’s wholly of her own making and not a commercial commodity. But while she may finally be showing signs of some questionable decision-making see her reality dating programme #1 Single that recently aired in the States and is represented here with the passable theme tune Single Me Out – the only new song included – Loeb’s integrity as a solid pop musician remains un tarnished and The Very Best Of showcases both her and her catalogue as an underappreciated but smiling success. **Aaron Alper**
It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that Johnny Cash falls rather a long way outside the Wears The Trousers remit, but, at the risk of reviving a terrible cliché, behind every good man... well, you get the idea. So while we await the transformation of Mary J. Blige as Nina Simone, we’ve got front row seats to director James Mangold’s affectionate Cash biopic, Walk The Line.

Like last year’s award-grabbing Ray, the film economically sketches Cash’s tragic Arkansas childhood and his sad estrangement from a father who blamed him for the death of his elder sibling in a rather grisly sawmill accident. After first picking up a guitar during a brief stint in the forces, the young Cash (played by Joaquin Phoenix) returns home to marry his sweetheart Vivian (Ginnifer Goodwin), but soon discovers that door-to-door sales is not exactly his forte. Faced with rent and ever-mounting bills, Cash swiftly finds himself at the doorstep of Sam Phillips’ Sun Studios in Memphis. Driven by his distinctive freight-train chords, Cash’s tales of hard luck and losers are soon blazing a trail up the charts. At the epicentre of rock ‘n’ roll’s adolescence, he’s caught up in a new world of temptation, touring alongside the young Elvis (Tyler Hilton), Jerry Lee Lewis (Waylon Malloy Payne) and Roy Orbison (Jonathan Rice), and soon develops a dependency on amphetamines years before they would become rock cliché.

And this is where we come in, for Cash’s other primary problem is his attraction to feisty songstress June Carter (Reese Witherspoon), and from the moment she gets her dress caught in his guitar strap, there’s an immediate connection. Carter’s apple pie affability proves to be the perfect foil to Cash’s introspective darkness, but despite one night of unrestrained passion, their guiding Christian background forbids their adulterous union. Victims of their circumstance, Cash penned the eponymous Walk The Line as an assertion of marital fidelity, while Carter composed the equally classic Ring Of Fire to express the pain of her forbidden love.

Certainly it’s their abiding attraction that provides the film’s true heart, and both Phoenix and Witherspoon were nominated for top Oscar honours in recognition of these career-defining performances. The film is no slouch either when it comes to the music, and the success of any musical biopic surely rests largely on the songs themselves. Unlike Jamie Foxx’s Ray or Val Kilmer’s Jim Morrison, who were rife with affectations, Phoenix’s portrayal of Cash’s restrained primal energy transcends a Stars In Their Eyes-type impersonation with a performance that appears naturally spontaneous rather than studied. Hunching his shoulders and aiming his guitar like a machine gun across the audience, Phoenix’s pitch-perfect live vocals, specifically in the Folsom Prison sequences, are testament to the work of music producer T Bone Burnett (O Brother, Where Art Thou? [2000]), whose score nicely compliments Cash’s musical oeuvre.

Witherspoon is just as convincing, with her sweet, affecting trill brimming with the confidence needed to play the character of June, whose life on the stage started as a child with The Carter Family. The inspired casting of established recording artists in supporting roles also lends a refreshing authenticity to the rich musical tapestry. In her first feature film, rock and country artist Shelby Lynne plays Carrie, the matriarch of the Cash family, whose unconditional love for her son provides the emotional balance to her husband’s toughness. A long-time admirer of Cash’s music, Lynne wrote the song Johnny Met June on the day that he died in 2003, and while she may have been cast for her voice here, her acting skills match those around her.

More than just another exercise in Hollywood myth making, Walk The Line actually began as a collaborative effort with the original Man In Black himself until his death. Based on biographies and extensive interviews, Mangold’s love for his subject is evident throughout but from the telling title in, the film plays it straight, and every significant moment in Cash’s biography cues another famous composition. For all of Cash’s ragged edges, the chronological narrative arc is too neat and could have benefited from a more oblique treatment of rock star mythology, like Gus Van Sant’s anguished Kurt Cobain’s untimely demise in Last Days (2005). However, this is a minor distraction.

The film starts, and ends, in 1968 with Cash’s infamous Folsom Prison concert that has become part of rock ‘n’ roll folklore. As a man who had cultivated the image of the incarcerated rebel, Cash may have lived on the right side of the prison walls, but after years of emotional imprisonment to drugs and past demons, this storming finale also marks the end of his own personal redemption. More than just a cinematic eulogy, Cash’s musical legacy is cherished by all involved in this film, and although it never fully jumps the hurdles of rock biopic cliché, the Man In Black’s enduring everyman appeal on record positively crackles on screen.

Stephen Collings

Walk The Line is released on Region 2 DVD on May 4th. Read our interview with Reese Witherspoon exclusively at www.thetrousers.co.uk.
My first encounter with Tori Amos on video was a shot of her hurtling towards a giant spider’s web in the abstract European promo for *Cornflake Girl* (featured here as a bonus extra). Ironically, the striking red hair that hallmarks almost all of her other videos and inspires the name of this collection was indistinguishable to me as I marvelled at this monochrome masterpiece. Okay, well, in hindsight maybe it isn’t really a masterpiece, but then how many music videos are? It’s an inherently silly medium. Which is why it’s so refreshing to come across an artist willing to take a few risks and sometimes even embrace the silliness of it. In fact, most of the videos included here are, in their varying ways, even more remarkable than the cut I first fell in love with, but the point is the same: whichever avenue you take into the wonderful world of Amos’ visual output, it is likely to be a memorable one.

Her first video, *Silent All These Years*, is another bold affair and one that has provided most people with their first and most lasting impression of Amos – also becoming the source of the cover shot for her debut album. It comprises mostly of Tori, a white background, a wooden box, some bright red lipstick and those famous red tresses. Simple yet compelling, it works because it allows Amos to breathe. An artist with lesser presence wouldn’t be comfortable laying themselves open to such close scrutiny, yet Amos does it consistently. No matter what guise she takes, Amos never seems overwhelmed. You find yourself believing in her, whether trapped on display in a gallery window, being dragged from a burning building or bound and running away from an unidentified captor as we see in *Spark*, possibly the most gripping video I’ve ever laid eyes on. The results are exhilarating.

What hits you is the sheer variety of ideas that Amos and her collaborators seem to have. The sequencing of the videos contributes to this diversity, juxtaposing selections from different points in her fifteen-year career. It would have been silly to lump together the low-budget *Little Earthquakes* videos at the start of the collection. Whilst each video is its own entity and should be considered as such, the early videos are some of the most enjoyable to watch as Amos and director Cindy Palmano play around with the constrictions of the medium.

The music, as always, is simply outstanding. In fact, had her “reconditioned” retrospective *Tales Of A Librarian* (2003) been conceived and presented similarly to this it may have proved a greater testament to her talents. This has obviously been a labour of love for Amos and, overall, it’s a very well packaged and comprehensive collection. A couple of videos are conspicuous by their absence, however. One can only presume that contractual issues prevented the inclusion of the promo for her Stranglers cover, *Strange Little Girl*, as it is one of her best. The missing *Glory Of The 80s* video is more of a mystery, although the likely reason for its omission is that it just didn’t make the grade – it’s a video with a nice idea that wasn’t quite realised. Still, do a Google search for either of these and you’ll find them in seconds. As for extras, the personal commentary on each video is a very nice and often hilarious touch, allowing us an insight into the making of and ideas behind the clips.

Matthew Hall
Frankly, it’s been a fantastic year for The Go! Team. Their debut album Thunder, Lightning, Strike has become a major, if slow-burning hit — unbelievably, it was first released back in September 2004 — receiving widespread acclaim and annihilating genre labels left, right and centre... oh, and notching up a nod for the Mercury Music Prize. It should come as no surprise then that the Brighton/London six-piece are in a celebratory mood. This, their biggest UK tour to date, is completely sold-out, including a three-night residency at London’s Koko. Tonight’s line-up is yet another exercise in diversification for the Go! Team; they’ve put together a stellar female-fronted bands bonanza by roping in Seattle’s Smoosh and The Grates from Australia.

In case you hadn’t heard already, Smoosh are sisters Asya and Chloe who are, respectively, 13 and 11 years old. Having already found celebrity fans in Sufjan Stevens, Sleater-Kinney, Cat Power’s Chan Marshall, Death Cab For Cutie (whose drummer has been teaching Chloe) and now seemingly The Go! Team, their premise is a basic one — Chloe plays drums while Asya sings and presses the keys. Surprisingly, the limitations of their instruments by no means inhibits their sound. So while each song may sound different from the last, one thing is consistent throughout — their attitude. There’s something scarily fierce about Asya’s vocal delivery. Even at her tender age, she is showing the angry/uplifting makings of her older mentors in Sleater-Kinney. Equally, Chloe’s rhythms are primal and driving, and the relatively stripped-down arrangement really does showcase their musical abilities.

Their set is comprised of tracks from their excellent debut, She Like Electric, and a whole lot of new songs that amply disprove the doubters who claimed it was a fluke. That said, the uninitiated denizens of the audience clearly don’t know quite how to react to the duo. Obviously aware of their age, they are appropriately supportive and somewhat cautious; are they being exploited by a twisted svengali á la t.A.T.u? Do they write their own songs? Is it fair to take them out of school to tour with older rock bands?

Fortunately, Smoosh exercise a much greater degree of control over their career than Richard and Judy’s faux-lesbian enemies, and furthermore are prodigiously talented, with an originality and freshness unrivalled by most other bands so often jaded by the industry and wearing their influences all too plainly on their sleeves. Finishing with the grinding La Pump, a positively filthy electro-pop tune, Asya and Chloe exit stage right, their curious audience still slightly confused but primarily enthusiastic.

Next come The Grates making a great first impression by bounding cheerfully on to the stage. Singer Patience is a day-glo princess and perhaps a not-too-distant relative of Yeah Yeah Yeahs’ Karen O. Their music is similarly sparse — garage rock guitar, pounding rhythms and ecstatic, if somewhat deranged, vocals. Running from one side of the stage to the other, Patience makes for a manic and energetic figurehead, shaking her hair and pulling faces at the crowd. Though they are undoubtedly effective at warming up the crowd, the similarities with the Yeah Yeah Yeahs are almost too much — the voice and nonsensical yelps are trademark O. But to their credit, even if The Grates do excessively imitate, they at least do it well and with tunes and an energy that other carbon copies have failed to muster. Happily, their upcoming single, 19 20 20, is an undeniably spiky slice of angular art-pop.

Despite such strong support, the show belongs unarguably to The Go! Team. The balconies of the former theatre are packed with brightly dressed
punters, while the band is even more colourful than usual thanks to the special London-only addition of cheerleading backing dancers. It feels like a carnival, and perhaps appropriately, it is the day after Shrove Tuesday and the end of Carnaval in Rio de Janeiro. Their frontwoman Ninja, clad tonight in a yellow cheerleader skirt and a blue vest top, may not even be 5’2” but she commands the crowd like no other. Indeed, she puts so much energy into the performance that the band’s instrumental tracks are scattered throughout the set to allow her ample recovery time. Each song is properly introduced and Ninja makes each one an opportunity for some kind of crowd participation. Arms are waved, chants are chanted and it all begins to feel a little like a commune — during We Just Won’t Be Defeated there’s an irrepressible feeling of oneness.

It would be foolish to argue that The Go! Team’s huge success is purely due to Ninja’s leadership. Their music is like dreamscape, entirely positive, uplifting and utterly indefinable. In the live context, their show is an exhilarating blast through their album and a handful of new songs. In total, it lasts just over an hour but somehow feels sufficient. The Go! Team see no need in labouring the point, secure in the knowledge that even a short dose of their infectious magic is enough to put smiles on every last attendee as they exit into the slightly grimmer reality of Mornington Crescent. The band themselves may not know what the future holds — Thunder, Lightning, Strike is composed predominantly of samples and getting legal clearance was a long and difficult task — but, for the moment, they seem plenty rewarded by their crowd-pleasing antics and formidable reputation as pioneers of inimitably fantastic pop.

Robbie de Santos
Laura Veirs
Fleece & Firkin, Bristol
February 16th, 2006

The night does not start well. After a lengthy altercation with the bouncer about age, Citizen Cards and valid forms of ID in which I have to get my friend to drive down to the venue with my passport, I am finally allowed in midway through Pure Horsehair’s support slot feeling a little irate and somewhat weary. However, my malaise is dispelled in an instant when I catch sight of Laura herself sitting at a little table in the corner doodling on her set lists and signing stuff for the occasional fan. She’s sweet and entirely approachable, even when pestered by crazy-permed archetypal middle-aged men who have seemingly converged upon the venue to confirm the folk fan stereotype.

When she takes the stage solo, a serene hush cloaks the venue, in contrast to the noisy chatter that rather overwhelmed Pure Horsehair’s quiet melodies. It feels as if we’re watching one of our friends play for us. Opening with Cool Water — a joyfully simple and beautiful song — Veirs sets the tone for a set comprised mostly of older songs, many from 2004’s Carbon Glacier. This is surprising and refreshing as she’s touring behind last year’s Year Of Meteors, but chooses from her entire back catalogue and does not allow the new songs to dominate.

Announcing “It’s good to be in Bristol!” (and looking like she really means it), she launches into Lakeswinning and capably proves that she’s just as captivating solo as she is with the various incarnations of her band, The Tortured Souls. Making excellent use of a sampler and pre-programmed electronics, the song is ably constructed through a multitude of looped beats and layered vocals. This approach also perfectly suits the songs from Year Of Meteors, an album which sees Veirs embrace a far more electronic influence than ever before — think of a midpoint between The Postal Service and Gillian Welch. Speaking between songs, Laura seems almost apologetic that she hasn’t brought her band, but her impeccable musicianship shines through the myriad of sounds, melodies and layers that she spectacularly conjures on her own.

For Tiger Tattoos, Veirs passes out metal chiming sticks to members of the audience, asking them to accompany her by playing them against the venue’s walls and posts. It’s potentially a risky move as just one overactive participant could mar the song’s fragile beauty, but it pays off wonderfully. Under Laura’s direction, the crowd’s subtle chimes, as well as claps and even beatboxing (!), prove to be a highly effective accompaniment to her acoustic guitar and clear, crystalline vocals. On Fire Snakes, subtle electronic touches brush alongside the acoustics, and the song draws upon the geological and astrological images that Veirs returns to throughout the night — ice, stars, sea, glaciers.

During the main set, someone in the crowd yells out for Ether Sings, and Laura happily plays it when she returns for the encore, the beguiling melody weaving a hypnotic spell upon the attentive crowd. Throughout the evening, the beats and effects employed haven’t been at all obtrusive, but for closer Jailhouse Fire they are, and wonderfully so. Pulling out a Melody Pop (remember them?) and alternately whistling and chomping on it, she records and layers the sound until her whistling fills the venue. It’s a fitting end to an entirely charming evening.

Danny Weddup

Beth Orton
Warwick
Arts Centre
February 17, 2006

Listening to Beth Orton is a far more involving experience than simply hearing a collection of words and harmonies; she is a quaint reminder of all things female, lacking in all that is contemporary ‘celebrity’, and displaying instead a welcome vulnerability and her uniquely self-conscious form of storytelling. In a week that was filled with gossip magazines and tabloids splashed with headlines regarding Chantelle’s post-Big Brother faux-fame antics and Paris Hilton stumbling all over the autocue at the Brits, I was eager to see something distinctly natural, something with experience, emotional awareness and intellect. A forty minute dose of Beth Orton, complete with faded jeans and scuffed worn shoes, turns out to be the perfect medicine. Not a mini poodle or footballer boyfriend in sight!

The return of the old-style Orton, the one who sang about a Galaxy Of Emptiness and a particular Sweetest Decline, has been warmly received by most. At last, the somewhat weaker and commercially-targeted Daybreaker (2002) can now be safely placed at the back of the CD shelf, as her voice is once again divine and jam-packed with emotion, as if she’s been swept right back to her younger days with a brain overflowing with experience, emotional awareness and intellect. A forty minute dose of Beth Orton, complete with faded jeans and scuffed worn shoes, turns out to be the perfect medicine. Not a mini poodle or footballer boyfriend in sight!

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by the crowd. The one thing she does deny her fans is a rendition of her classic, poignant love song *Central Reservation;* with a semi-smile and a cringe, she informs us that she has "something against that one now".

In each tiny instance of a shift in mood, Orton allows us an extra inch of insight into her unusual and often overlooked talent. She may not grace the gossip columns from day to day, but her fame and what made her so gently revered is delivered with grace and a reminder of what ingredients are needed to make a modern, admirable woman. *Laura-May Coope*

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**The Like**
Camden Barfly, London
March 8, 2006
★★★★

It is midday on a Sunday and three young women are standing on a street corner in Camden Town. Wrapped up against the March chill, they could be any late teens/early twenties trio, and the fact that they haven't seen a bed to lie in in over 24 hours is not so odd for their generation. However, the fact that only six or so hours ago they were stood on a street corner in Paris not entirely unlike this one is. Freshly Eurostarred back from playing at a fashion show, The Like are about to do an afternoon show at Camden's Barfly, part of a bewilderingly heavy itinerary to purportedly break them in the UK. Either that or break them full stop.

Not that they are whinging about it. Later, Tennessee Thomas is proud to show off her drumstick blistered hands to anyone who wishes to be appalled by the mess they're in, while Charlotte Froom is endlessly enthusiastic and slips easily into her coolest-person-to-ever-pick-up-a-bass poses within an instant of arriving onstage. Straight after the set, she just as happily works the merchandising stall — "We sell more t-shirts if the girls do it themselves" explains their affable tour manager. Z Berg also shrugs off the crazy pace with the detachment of a dreamer who has written songs in her teens that many so-called mature writers would find hard to match in terms of their remarkable depth and passion.

A few days earlier at Nottingham's Rock City, a throng of fans cheered, screamed and sang every word of *Too Late*, while The Ramones-meets-The Cure hybrid of *What I Say & What I Mean* was greeted as if it were already a greatest hit. The stream of interviews, the TV shows they barely know the names of, the mad yo-yoing back and forth to London are all about this moment where The Like are, as an entity, a perfect, classic indie pop-rock threepiece with a masterful grasp of the epic and the intimate, often within the same song as is superbly displayed in *You Bring Me Down* and *(So I'll Sit Here)* Waiting.

In London, there is a sense of exposure in daylight for both the band and their audience, creating a true dramatic tension and blurring of the line between performer and listener; the venue is rammed to the edge of the curved stage. As Froom's basslines bob over Thomas' relentless beat, the finest swirls of shoegaze-y guitar since Lush emit from Berg's twin Orange amps. Already overtired, Z has an uphill struggle to keep her voice, but one has to marvel at the sheer grit of her performance as she lives out every raw emotion threaded through her lyrics.

Coming just at a time when the UK rock scene is all laddish boys-will-be-boys predicting a riot in the takeaway kebab house, The Like are surely the band that many have been waiting for; one with a pure, warm sound that goes straight for the heart. After today, they face another week of touring the country before heading back to Los Angeles for just one day off, then flying off again for an industry showcase in triplicate at SXSW in Austin. Both loving and laughing at it, The Like uncomplainingly thrive on the pace. And that pace will surely only increase as their message gets across to more and more potential fans. *Kevin Hewick*

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**Giant Drag**

Academy 2, Manchester
February 17, 2006
★★½

It's fair to say that Los Angeles duo Annie Hardy and Micah Calabrese, collectively known as Giant Drag, have problems. Problems that need to be ironed out if they are to achieve a level of success beyond that afforded to artists of the cult variety and stand on a higher platform. As evidenced on last year's debut *Hearts & Unicorns*, both are very talented musicians and it's hard to argue with their live performances too; tonight's support slot for The Cribs sees Annie hit every note perfectly and Micah display his mastery of the art of playing the drums and synths simultaneously. The problems are not in the songs either; these have a wonderful post-grunge feel and tracks like *yfind (You Fuck Like My Dad)*, *Drugs* and *My Dick Sux* reflect the duo's innate sense of quirkiness.

The problems arise when the audience is blissfully unaware of Annie's unusual banter, and it can come as a damming blow in the live context. She's overly perverse and either an obsessive liar or a very bad comedienne, depending on your view. Joking about child paedophilia and incest is hardly the way to the nation's heart, although a few in the crowd do warm to her, if only out of sympathy. Perhaps trying to capitalise on that, Annie points out the audiences at their two previous shows "didn't like Giant Drag", but it's more than obvious why. Whilst Karen O of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs would simply dismiss the jeers of a faux-macho yell of "show us yerr tits!" or "fuck me!" with a sneering "suck your own dick" when she first came to the country, Annie clearly hasn't taken any tips from the shrieking New Yorker. Either she tries to join in on the joke and adapt her stories to include members of the audience, or, like most bands, she pretends not to hear the calls. Considering how irritating hecklers are, you could never criticise a band member for doing this, but given their abrupt nature Giant Drag are going to have to get used to such crude shouts out, and, in my opinion, the best way to deal with them is to bluntly put the caller back in their place.

Even so, the duo offer an interesting live show, and to give their music justice it's worth seeing a gig. At the very least, it will certainly help you to form your own opinion, because like Marmite, you either love, hate, or are allergic to Giant Drag. *Tiffany Daniels*
When the soundtrack of my formative years takes to the stage, the technician doesn’t even bother to turn the lights down, perhaps sensing the already feverish anticipation of the crowd. Mostly jammed with fellow New Zealanders, the sold-out venue swells with applause as the object of their affection greets them with a simple “Hi, nice to see you” before launching straight into her greatest hit *Sway* from 1998’s debut album *Drive*. Shrugging her shoulders as if to say “well what other song would I start with?”, Runga affably commands the attention of everyone before getting a fit of the giggles midway through the song. But rather than being greeted with a good natured heckle, the besotted crowd stand still and quiet, hanging on Runga’s every word, me included. She’s a connection to our distant homeland, someone who transports us back to a precious time and place and lets us forget our aching feet and crappy jobs.

Wearing a black vintage-style dress to match her newly-cropped glossy black hair and dusky eye shadow, Bic stands with one hand in her pocket and the other on the mic, clearly quite comfy in her own way. For someone who regularly sells out venues umpteen times the size of Lock 17, the set is very simple; just a black curtain, red lighting, Neil Finn on the piano and a guitarist whose name I don’t quite catch. The Finn connection goes back a few years. A self-proclaimed Runga fan, Finn asked her to co-headline a sold-out tour (also with John Dobbyn) before adding harmonies and flourishes to her 2002 album *Beautiful Collision* and the new one, *Birds*. Released in New Zealand last November, the album finally gets its UK release in May, and our first taste of it comes with second song *Captured*. Runga’s clear, soothing and peaceful vocal wraps itself around the accompaniment; it’s hard to believe that a song with such a mysterious, ghost-like quality can be carried so expertly by just three (albeit very talented) individuals.

Introducing *Say After Me* as the future first single to be taken from *Birds* (surprisingly not *Winning Arrow* as in other territories), Runga knowingly adds “the whole song is real depressing” before clicking her fingers and counting her compadres in. Proving that she can be a very intense performer when the situation calls for it, Runga tends to either close her eyes so tightly as to concentrate immensely on every note or to stand deathly still looking straight out at the crowd. Tonight, her expert manipulation of the tension climaxes with *It’s Over*, during which she appears to become genuinely upset and uneasy with the memories invoked. It’s no surprise really, many of these new songs sprang directly from the death of her father in 2005. But as the evening continues, she begins to get more playful with the audience. She starts a song or two with springy little dances, claps and laughs with the band and asks endearingly dappy things such as “how does it go again?” and “do I play in this one?”, to which one of them answers “if you want to!” and she does.

After just ten songs she says goodnight and departs the stage with her band, but we’re having none of it. And when she returns to play the new album’s title track, a loud rippling “shhh!” rushes round the room. Clearly us kiwis are eager to prolong the feeling of home. As the darkly dramatic number draws to a close, Runga thanks the boys and proceeds to do another two alone; the worldly wise *No Crying No More* and harking back to her younger days with *Drive*. Then with a smile and a wave she departs with a promise — “see you in a couple of months!”

On the strength of tonight’s performance, it might finally be time for Runga’s career to take flight in Britain.

*Julia Paynter*
The Pipettes
Concorde 2, 
Brighton
March 27, 2006 ★★★½

Despite my initial plan to review only The Pipettes’ performance tonight, the appearance of two other equally unique acts on stage forced a bit of a rethink, and I thought it only right and just to write about the entire affair. First to take to the stage are Teasing LuLu, an indie/punk/rock band comprising guitarist/lead singer Lucy, bassist/backing vocalist Louisa and drummer Jason, currently gearing up to release their very limited edition debut single, Infatuation, on indie label Militant Recordings in April. It’s a shameful thing to admit to, but I was planning to turn up just before The Pipettes were scheduled on stage. As it turns out, I’m glad I wasn’t so lame. To get an idea of Teasing LuLu’s live show, try to imagine what would happen if Wayne’s World’s Cassandra (as played by Tia Carrere) happened to manage a band with the help of Justine Frischmann, PJ Harvey, Debbie Harry and Queens Of The Stone Age frontman Josh Homme. Under such tutelage, I reckon the result would be not too dissimilar to the sound of this very fine band; they really can wail! Visit their MySpace and listen to Loser, a song that boasts the unusual pairing of a knockout rock track and tuneful screaming, and while you’re there, have a listen also to Cat & Mouse — they actually miao!

Next up are Miss Pain, another two-girl, one-boy combo I had read all about on the back of a toilet door the previous Thursday and was therefore expecting something extraordinary. I was not disappointed… they were extraordinarily ludicrous. I tried really hard to like them, really I did, but if you gotta try that hard then something’s amiss. What I’m secretly hoping is that they’re actually a comedy concept band since the entire experience was on a par with watching a particularly excruciating episode of The Office, only there were feathers and synthesisers and bizarre dancing… or maybe I’m just not avant-garde enough. Hmm.

Finally, The Pipettes are welcomed enthusiastically to the stage and show the crowd the real meaning of fantastic. Apart from the fact that the girls (Gwenno, Becky and Rose) are talented vocalists, they’re also brilliant fun. Of course, it’s all very tongue in cheek but that’s just part of the charm. You don’t just go to listen to the music, you go to watch them dance and wear their excellent dresses. Although I worried at first that my feminist principles might conflict with my enjoyment of The Pipettes, any doubts vanished pretty sharpish for two reasons. Firstly, despite being an example of a knowingly post-modern or post-post-modern (or whatever!) act and having a sound reminiscent of The Supremes or The Ronettes, none of their lyrics scream ‘doormat’ and none appear to be strung up on a man. Secondly, even one who is as prone to being a bit of a stuffed shirt like myself cannot resist lightening up for ladies this upbeat.

Recent single Your Kisses Are Wasted On Me and older tracks like ABC and Judy are the standouts of the set, and while it could certainly be argued that they’re a bit too grown up to be singing about schoolboys, and maybe the doo-wop fixation complete with polka dots is a gimmick that won’t last, to be honest that’s rather beside the point. I don’t imagine for a second that it’s meant to be taken all that seriously. The Pipettes are simply fabulous, unapologetic, witty, bubblegum pop purveyors with bags of charisma and an excellent live show.

Joan Shirro

HK Shirro

Fortescue Avenue, London
March 31, 2006 ★★★½

After traipsing through the faintly depressing underbelly of East London, we arrived at the art gallery known as Fortescue Avenue. It wasn’t quite what I was expecting, being pretty much just a garage lock-up in an industrial back street. A man standing outside was handing out bottles of beer and plastic cups of lemonade and there were only about five other people there. Inside, the garage had been painted white, and hardboard squares and triangles had been set up in one corner, onto which the videos of Heidi Kilpelainen aka HK119 were being projected.

The videos themselves were highly entertaining, which was a good thing as we ended up watching them about twice on a loop while waiting for the main event. Each had its own distinct character and featured HK using everyday disposable objects (in keeping with the theme of her debut album) in a number of creative ways; for instance, wearing a sock and a slinky over her head for In-Valid to highly disturbing effect, or wearing binbags round her shoulders and on her head for Friend For Dinner, making her look vaguely canine in appearance. Clearly, the videos have been made on absolutely no budget at all, but they’re a damn sight more interesting and imaginative than many that are made with millions. What’s more is that they serve to flesh out Heidi’s songs, raising them up from one-dimensionality into living, breathing creatures.

Half an hour after the live performance was supposed to start, we were still waiting. The garage had filled up though, and it didn’t seem quite so awkward. What it had filled up with, however, was a sizeable throng of highly pretentious Hoxton types, wearing capes and berets and sporting strange facial hair. I wondered if these people fully appreciated the tongue-in-cheek silliness of HK119’s work, or whether they were taking it all rather too seriously. Finally there was movement, and HK119 appeared from behind the various polygons. She was dressed in her usual black catsuit, with black polystyrene triangles on her head, arm and leg. Bathed in a blue light and standing motionless on a block, one arm outstretched, she slipped into the opening number Censor Me. Rather unnervingly, she had painted open eyes on her firmly shut lids for that Mona Lisa staring effect. All suitably robotic and her performance was impeccable.

Shaking off the subdue beginning, HK picked up the pace with highly energetic renditions of debut single Pick Me Up plus her ode to cannibalism Friend For Dinner and the self-explanatory Malfunction. Bounding around the ‘stage’, she screeched, laughed maniacally and generally looked quite menacing, but ultimately utterly fabulous. Overall, it was an enjoyable and well-constructed performance. Needless to say, HK119 really deserves to be performing in better venues in the future!

Bryn Williams