

RECORDS



Are We Not Devo?

Still the best after all these years

David Bowie
Stage
RCA

Recorded earlier this year during the first half of his world tour, *Stage* represents the current David Bowie persona and live performance. The focus understandably enough is on his last two albums. *Low* and *Heroes*, two-thirds of a trilogy destined to be completed on Warners as Bowie insists that *Stage* completes his recording commitments for RCA. This double live album would certainly be an auspicious way of saying ta-ta to any label because it belittles any other live recording I've heard in recent years.

Record One is Bowie looking back to his pre-Berlin days, mainly to *Ziggy Stardust* represented by five songs that have more than just nostalgic period piece interest. His present band definitely sounds like his best ever line-up as they fluidly glide through the Ziggy bracket neatly folding one song onto another. "Five Years" is particularly interesting as Bowie sings it so reverently that for him it appears to have new meaning. Roger Powell's synthesiser simulating the train intro leads the band through a breathless version of "Station to Station", but it's a potent "Fame", complete with vocal effects, and a rollicking "TVC 15" that provide the real excitement to wind up Record One.

Record Two is devoted to the *Low/Heroes* excerpts, and these, although self contained, would have made a great single live album, and serve as an effective contrast to his previous work, a contrast which arguably reveals the superiority of his last two albums. *Low* was pessimism at work, "a withdrawal time", as Bowie calls it when he was stuck for words and so started playing musical textures with Eno, a collaboration that continued on the more hopeful world of *Heroes*. On *Stage* the songs from these albums are performed with more verve and colour than the mechanical exactness that pervaded the studio recordings. Sure this is a distinction that you can make about many live/studio albums, but in Bowie's case there's more to it. He sounds as if he's enjoying himself fronting a band that never falters; the rhythm section of George Murray and Dennis Davis are so controlled and yet energetic, and lead guitarist Adrian Belew is outstanding especially on "What in the World" and "Breaking Glass". On the instrumentals, "Warszawa", "Art Decade" and "Sense of Doubt" Bowie is helped out by Roger Powell and Sean Mayes (String Ensemble) and the textural effects are overpowering.

Stage, then, is an illustration of an artist who has reserves of pose and panache and who is in command of his abilities here and now, but I'm offering no guarantees that this album will accurately reflect his state or 'stage' of mind say a year from now. But we don't have to wait that long, and by the evidence on *Stage* it would be unforgivable to miss his shows when he arrives here.

George Kay

Q: Are We Not Men?

A: We Are Devo!

Devo
Warner Bros

Imagine waking up in 1984, switching on the radio and hearing nothing but Metal Machine Music, no matter what station you turned to, any hour of the day.

Devo don't just imagine it, they live it. The favourite sons of Akron, Ohio, have taken the ugly industrial images of their stamping ground and produced a new art form that is stagnant yet innovative, stupefying and stimulating at the same time.

The theory of de-evolution is logical when looked at with foresight. If a statement is made, then the opposite must also be true. Once you accept that, it all makes sense. Do you believe in Darwin's theory of evolution? In that case, surely de-evolution must also ring true. If we are descended from protozoa then we must one day return to that form. The truth lies in the soil. Ashes to ashes, and all that.

Devo put forth the proposition that mankind is in a state of de-evolution even now. The industrial revolution has turned us all into obedient little cyphers, willing to do our masters' bidding for the sake of the almighty dollar, to conform to set patterns, to look and dress alike if it means success.

Devo make computerised sounds for a computerised age. Melody, rhythm, harmony, are all mere words, dust beneath the wheels.

At the same time, don't be deceived that Devo do not rock, albeit in their own style. Listen to them disembowel "Satisfaction". You can fashion your own robot dance to it, even if you've never been to a disco in your life. Get the picture?

If Bowie's *Low* was the forecast, then Devo is the long-range outlook. Music to stare at the wall to.

Devo are presently making the *only* modern music. You too can be a Devo-tee. It takes little effort. In fact, it takes no effort at all. Just sit tight, be complacent and let the machine overwhelm you.

On the other hand, if you are truly Devo, the opposite can be just as true. So what are you doing about it?

Duncan Campbell

Blondie
Parallel Lines
Chrysalis

If Blondie don't become household-name fodder, it won't be for want of trying.

With each album, they've produced a sound that has steadily progressed, becoming more polished, more disciplined, and much cuter.

Parallel Lines, their third, shows the band establishing its identity in sound to augment Debbie Harry's undeniable visual appeal. Blondie can now be truly said to have divorced themselves from both the New York and New Wave tags.

This album shows a maturity of talent and perhaps just a shade more continuity than its excellent predecessor, *Plastic Letters*, which seemed to skip from one stream of influence to the next.

The band has gained two new members in Frank Infante (guitar) and Nigel Harrison (bass), which has given a fuller sound and allowed more composing talent to be aired.

Songs like "One Way Or Another," "Pretty Baby" and "Sunday Girl" are delightful slices of pure pop, something missing from the airwaves too much today.

"Will Anything Happen" and "I Know" nod back to the early Noo Yawk days, while "Face Away and Radiate" lets Debbie give a mesmerising vocal performance and recalls acid rock just faintly, though there's not a hint of plagiarism.

Everyone should have a Blondie album, just to give something to smile about. This group has the collective heart of a teenager, and gets a kick out of making music that just entertains, and does not pontificate.

Duncan Campbell

Beach Boys Bounce Back

The Beach Boys
M.I.U. Album
Reprise

Ready for some critical insight? — "In measuring success, commercial criteria are different from artist criteria." (Phew!) Consider the Beach Boys.

In commercial terms their career has gone steadily downhill throughout the 70's. From very healthy sales of *Surf's Up* in '71 the subsequent *Carl and The Passions* bombed so badly that Warners almost refused to continue financing *Holland* when recording got behind schedule. Sure, Capitol have done very nicely repackaging the 60's hits but new material has continually failed. *15 Big Ones* and last year's *Love You* were both complete flops. So the new album is released with no ballyhoo whatever, no inner sleeve, no promotional material. Even its title is low profile. (M.I.U. is a recording studio.)

What about artistic success? Most folks agree that *Surf's Up* was definitely a gem. *Carl and The Passions* definitely wasn't, and *Holland* was a mixture. Then came Brian's return and opinions diverged. Colleague William Dart, for example, regards *Love You* as an outstanding achievement while I find it virtually unlistenable.

But I surely love the new album. Side One's something of a mixture: two oldies, some newies and a spot of self-imitation. The new songs are competent enough. "Kona Coast" is about returning to "Hawaii" so it reuses the harmony hook from that earlier song. Carl sings Buddy Holly's "Peggy Sue" which could be a leftover from *15 Big Ones*.

The surprise is "Come Go With Me", a lovely acknowledgement of the group's debt to the doo-wop tradition. Originally a Dell-Vikings' hit in '57 it is sung quite straight, complete with echoed finger snapping and honking sax.

If Side One tends towards mimicry, Side Two offers genuine re-creation and the most consistently enjoyable sequence of songs they've done for ages. Furthermore, Brian wrote or co-wrote all except one and, although nearly all lead vocals are by Mike, Brian's solo spot is a

vast improvement over his croaking on *Love You*.

Most numbers return to that lighthearted vocal joy by which the Beach Boys invented California in the 60's. Of course they're older now, so when banks of strings buoy up somewhat thinner harmonies you've got to allow a bit of soft focus.

The lush production is by Al Jardine and one Ron Altbach who also co-wrote three songs, including the gorgeous "Winds of Change" which closes the album. If he can write any more like this the group better hang on to him.

This album shows that the Beach Boys are capable of returning to former heights by refurbishing their original simple strengths — good tunes and catchy harmonies. But will they sell again? God only knows; I'm just a reviewer, not manager of WEA.

Peter Thomson

