

Records

Sly and Robbie Language Barrier Island

There have, of course, been rumours. Ever since their last foray with Grace Jones (*Living My Life*), tales concerning Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare have been mainly of drugs and waylessness. Certainly theirs has been the lamp that burns twice as brightly, an awesome talent and chemistry; it would not be surprising to find that this album is the last burst of their drug-accelerated brilliance.

Commonsense, however, says that this cannot possibly be a conclusion. *Language Barrier* is the sort of big, sprawling art that can only be achieved by people ignorant of its power.

To say that it walks the familiar no-man's-land between pop and reggae (Grace Jones, UB40) is to understate its spotlessly modern feel. 'Get to This, Get to That' is the last great unreleased Grace Jones single; with her vocals and video production (which we wouldn't see

anyway in liddle ol' Newsy-land) it would be the next 'Jamaican Guy'. 'Miles (Black Satin)' is the sort of whistle-along whimsy accredited to Ryuichi Sakamoto. And the intro/outro snippets by Dunbar are the stuff which the first Art of Noise album was made of.

'Make 'em Move' and 'No Name on the Bullet' are the stars. Would you believe, Cabaret Voltaire? Betcha wouldn't, but compare these songs to the Cab's 'Warm' and 'Fascination'; the same pretty riff nestled between fluid and sliding rhythm parts. Which sounds far fetched, but what are you reading this for? Go and buy the bloody thing — best six songs (save for Herbie Hancock's dull 'Bass and Trouble' on side two) you'll dip into on general release this year.

Chad Taylor

Various Artists perform Kurt Weill Lost in the Stars A&M

Seems like a good idea — introduce one of this century's outstanding composers for theatre to a new generation by having his work performed by various top popular and jazz artists. Thus we get the likes of Sting, Lou Reed,

Tom Waits, Marianne Faithfull, Carla Bley, Charlie Haden, Van Dyke Parks, etc, each interpreting different pieces by a German Jew who has been dead over 35 years.

It doesn't quite work out as expected however. The instrumentalists feel free to remain close to their originals or depart radically as required. A couple of the jazz versions are very successful, particularly the glorious Carla Bley and Phil Woods rendition of the album's title track. The vocalists on the other hand generally strive to tailor their performances to Brecht and Weill's original conceptions. Consequently Sting's fans aren't likely to love his strictly executed 'Mac the Knife'. Nor will Marianne's faithful thrill to her 'Ballad of the Soldier's Wife'. About the only one who gets to rock — but gently — is Lou Reed on 'September Song'. What the album might possibly do however, is open the ears of some theatre followers to a few pop singers. (There are excellent liner notes for anyone seeking fax'n'info on Kurt Weill.)

Peter Thomson

The Triffids Born Sandy Devotional White Hot Records

David McComb's eerie folk tales,

taken from a seemingly endless supply of Western Australian metaphors, continue to attract widely varying responses as the Triffids bring home their second-and-a-half LP, recorded (for the first time) in England with Echo and the Bunnymen producer Gil Norton.

New member "Evil" Graham Lee (steel guitar) helps to point the Triffids' sound towards a lush, occasionally countryish feel, augmented by additional strings and keyboards, as evidenced in 'Estuary Bed', a despairing tale, like so many of McComb's, of desperate love and tragedy. The three following songs bring a lighter side of the Triffids to the fore, despite their tragic content. McComb brings the sparse 'Chicken Killer' to life, whooping and barely suppressing a cry of laughter, and the cabaret-style presentation of 'Tarilup Bridge' reveals Jill Birt to be singing an hilariously unsubtle ode. Then 'Lonely Stretch' takes McComb on a metaphorical "wrong turn" as things get monumental, finishing the song with "rock my soul in the bosom of Abraham ..."

The second side of *Born Sandy Devotional* is much less interesting, with 'Stolen Property' being the only track worthy of much

note, Robert McComb's violin echoing around the saddest song on the album, the tale of a young girl's death through accidentally taking poison.

It is a little cruel to continue to write the Triffids off as Doors-pretenders. Despite the poor NZ pressing of *Born Sandy Devotional*, they show they have managed to concrete their reputation and niche, even if it doesn't measure up to the promise of *Treeless Plain* three years ago. It must be said though, that for the best offering from the pop side of Australiana, ignore the NME and check out the Go-Betweens' *Liberty Belle* (PolyGram import) — 'Apology Accepted' being about the bestestnest thing around this year!

Paul McKessar

Princess Stimulant

For a singer whose image plays so large a part in her musical success, Princess's role in her album is arbitrary in the eyes of musicians. Stock/Aitken/Waterman, who write and perform the music. Like producers Jolley and Swain (Spandau Ballet, Alison Moyet), Stock, Aitken and Waterman work to a consistent formula. Ironically, it's up to Princess, the woman whose credit appears as an afterthought, to make the repeated formulas work.

The singles, all included on the album, are good examples of straightforward songs lifted out of the ordinary by her vocal performances of character and conviction. Princess may not be Annie Lennox but she can win you over, 'After the Love Has Gone' being a perfect (and durable) example.

The Go-Go tempo of 'Tell Me Tomorrow' would make an excellent fourth single, and 'Anytime's the Right Time' is as agreeable as 'Say I'm Your No 1', if not quite as catchy. Maybe it lacks the latter's 'Strawberry Letter 22'-style intro (always a teaser).

Princess does get to write and perform her own 'Just a Tease', but the song is more Meatloaf than soul food. Perhaps SA&W are justified in their control after all, but listening to the five strongest tracks out of the eight, I wish the three backing musicians would drop their pretensions and give her something looser to work with. A capable debut, nonetheless.

Chad Taylor

Black Uhuru Brutal RAS

Linton Kwesi Johnson
In Concert
Rough Trade
Horace Andy
and Rhythm Queen
Elementary
Rough Trade

The loss of lead singer Michael Rose last year could have spelt the end to Black Uhuru. Rose's militant songs and strident, urgent vocals produced three outstanding albums (climaxing with 1981's classic *Red*) and two others which, while not as consistent, at least

produced sufficient moments to maintain credibility. Sly and Robbie's reggae-funk fusion never sounded more potent than behind Rose's emphatic declarations, balanced with Puma Jones and Ducky Simpson's falsetto/bass harmonies.

Now Rose is gone, and his solo debut is awaited with interest. His place in Black Uhuru has been taken by Junior Reid, a surprise choice, having gained a handful of dancehall hits on Greensleeves and Black Roots, but being hardly distinguished in a highly competitive field. Listening to *Brutal*, Reid's intended role becomes plain. He can inject sufficient grit into his voice to sound about as close to Rose as you can get. 'Let Us Pray', 'Dread in the Mountain', 'Fit You Haffie Fit' and the title track are all very typical of the BU sound. Puma provides some variety with her first recorded lead vocal, 'City Vibes', even though it does show up some of her shortcomings as a singer. *Brutal* only manages five out of 10 through having too much filler and turning the Black Uhuru stance into more of a pose.

LKJ now claims to have "retired" from live performances, although he's since made the odd "comeback" for charity or political purposes. This shy genius of academic bent seems to find the concert stage an ordeal. This 1984 London gig with Dennis Bovell's superb Dub Band is pervaded by a sense of uneasiness, on the part of the star of the show. When talking or reciting by himself, he conveys a feeling of "What am I doing here?" When the band is in full swing, he can lose himself in the rhythm, concentrate on his delivery, and sound more comfortable. The material covers the full spectrum of Johnson's work, although I would have preferred 'Five Nights of Bleeding' to be done with the band, as Johnson's nervous solo delivery robs it of its inherent menace. Also missing, without excuse, is 'Street 66', one of LKJ's finest moments. Nonetheless, *In Concert* remains essential, particularly for Linton's enlightening comments on his work. We have not heard the last of this man.

Horace Andy Hinds started his singing career with Studio One in 1970. A consistent and versatile hitmaker, he seems happy in just about any format. His high-pitched, reedy voice can handle Lovers and Roots with equal aplomb, and in *Elementary*, he tries Electrobeat and emerges smiling again. His collaborator on this project is multi-instrumentalist Caroline Williams, a keyboards player of considerable experience in the reggae field who goes by the performing name of Rhythm Queen. The songs are light and melodic, the riddims footloose, the feeling Irie. The album, we hear, is selling.

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Duncan Campbell

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