

Records

David Bowie Never Let Me Down EMI

If Bowie's a tourist then this is the jet-lag, the jumbled baggage; Def Jam tangled with the psychedelia, funk spilt over the rock and roll. Yesterday's riffs are repeated as if they were new ideas. The paternal odes to lost little (China) girls are still being sung down the hotel phone ("When I believed in nothing I called her name") and the management is receiving one complaint after another ("I know a government man / He was a blind as the moon"). The TV screen ("I keep a good friend on video tape") is filled with murder, Chernobyl and Prince ("And me my little red Corvette has driven by"). Hush, children: Uncle Bowie has stories to tell.

There's a lot of nostalgia in *Never Let Me Down*. 'Zeroes' is an anthem straight off *Aladdin Sane* — with maybe a splash of mid-70s Who. The album is slam-dunk rock, sweetened with pop riffs (the title track is the best example) and the rounded pace of *Let's Dance* and 'Dancing with the Big Boys'. By the end of side two the formula is tired and '87 and Cry', 'Too Dizzy' and 'Bang Bang' all run into each other.

Everywhere else sounds just fine. 'Glass Spider' is a Brian Froud fairytale, camp and exotic. 'Shining Star (Making My Love)' is the doodle of a master ("Peter met Frank from a dummy run gang — blew heads outta shape for the name of Trotsky, Sinn Fein, Hitler cashdown"). It's jerkily paced — like *Lodger's* 'Yasassin'. 'Day-in Day-out' is a fat, swaggering bit of rock. 'Beat of Your Drum' and the title track are the crest of the wave, jaunty riffs jammed between loud guitar, bass and drums.

Never Let Me Down is Peter Pan with an axe to grind. Bowie goes all out to prove his 40 years-worth of virility and energy while constantly reminding us of his experience in both words and music ("I've been touched with vermin, cowardice, lice"). The mood is throwaway and rousing and the messages carefully signposted.



Wynton Marsalis

Bowie will be taking *Never Let Me Down* on a "Serious Moonlight" sized tour but he'll be travelling on 'Blue Jean's ticket — rock-ish, mock aggression with lotsa horns and choruses you can sing. Imagine 'Modern Love' sung by someone in a bad mood, and you have the general idea. His best album since *Scary Monsters*.
Chad Taylor

The Smiths The World Won't Listen Rough Trade

With the ink barely dry on a lucrative deal with EMI, the Smiths' previous label Rough Trade have released this collection of 1985-86 singles and B-sides as a parting gesture to a band that had remained faithful to them in the face of numerous juicy offers since they sprang from Manchester four years ago.

Ever since the impact of 'This Charming Man' with Morrissey scattering flowers in the video, the Smiths have drawn a divergence of opinion that's rarely been neutral. Morrissey's posturing has always alienated the purists who prefer their singers with no frills/affectations or lyrical/literacy pretensions, and at the other end he's seen as a minor visionary who frets in Oscar Wilde's old house over the state of dear old Blighty.

There is no truth when it comes to taste but for my money the Smiths, aided and abetted by Morrissey's gift for the poignant overstatement and Marr's graceful guitar, have fingered the pulse of



Morrissey, Smiths



Al Hunter

a sick society, and its lifeforms, often enough to be the most important British band of the 80s. On *The World Won't Listen* this claim is borne out by the loneliness of 'That Joke isn't Funny Anymore', the meek-won't-inherit-the-earth angle of 'Ask', which musically picks up where 'Some Girls are Bigger than Others' left off, the underrated pair of losers that inhabit 'Bigmouth Strikes Again' and 'The Boy with the Thorn in His Side' and precious unsung B-sides



Branford Marsalis

like 'Asleep', 'Unloveable' and 'Ruber Ring'.

What has thwarted the Smiths bid for immortality has been their occasional lapses in form noted on *The World Won't Listen* in their descent into the clumsy R&B of 'Panic', 'London' and 'Shakespeare's Sister'. Similar lapses have undercut their three studio albums proper, and it's ironic that, unless they break the mould with EMI, they may be remembered for crucial compilations like *Hatful of Hollow* and *The World Won't Listen*.
George Kay

Al Hunter Neon Cowboy CBS

If we need to impose a local product quota on radio stations, it implies that we use different criteria to judge the worth, artistic or otherwise, of our product compared with overseas records. My own standard of judgement has always been, would I really want to play this while flopping onto the sofa with a vodka and orange after a hard day's work?

The number of times I've answered "yes" can unfortunately be counted on the fingers of a short-sighted butcher, but Al Hunter joins the list with this collection of country originals and covers. The strength of Al's songwriting, the tasty musical contributions of Kenny Francis, Stuart Pearce and Dave Dobbyn, the sympathetic production by Dave Marrett and Stuart Pearce all

combine to produce a record that is among the very finest local albums.

Now we all know there's country and there's *country*, and Al shucked the rhinestone-and-glitter side of Main St, Nashville, long ago to develop his own style with a voice that echoes the heartaches and hangovers of George Jones and the redneck roustering of Merle Haggard. Country music's pure simplicity is its strength and beauty to aficionados — and its weakness to non-believers. Al is a believer... believe it! His legendary title track shines like new boots, and his version of 'Honky Tonk Song' stomps on the likes of designer-cowboy Dwight Yoakam (whose debut was one of this writer's faves of '86, incidentally). Slower material like 'Deeper Shade of Blue' and the faintly familiar 'Someone Will Wind Up With a Broken Heart' are polished songs buffed to a brighter shine by the emotion in Al's voice.

One off the top shelf then from Al Hunter. Only two quibbles — first, the yunky-yunk 'Country Music' would be good as a single or as *That's Country's* theme tune, but it sounds a little out of place here. Also, a different running order would have given the album a better flow. Minor points.

Al loves his work. You will too.
Ian Morris

Branford Marsalis Royal Garden Blues CBS Wynton Marsalis J Mood CBS

The way I heard it is that Wynton was so peeved with brother Branford and pianist Kenny Kirkland for going gigging with Sting that he fired both from his group. While the pianist has been replaced, the saxophonist hasn't, which means Wynton is now down to a quartet for *J Mood*. Inevitably, the reduced lineup results in less richness in unison playing as well as in the variety of soloing. However such disadvantages are far outweighed by the fact that, because of the split, we now get two high quality Marsalis albums where we once may only have got one.

On *Royal Garden Blues* Branford also sticks to the standard quartet format but uses a variety of musi-

cians (including Kenny Kirkland). Significantly, the most used drummer is Wynton's long-serving Jeff Watts. Watts' vigorous style is obviously too inspirational to relinquish lightly.

Wynton just continues to grow, even beyond the considerable achievements of 1985's *Black Codes (from the Underground)* album. This time out he seems to be saying more, often by using fewer notes. *J Mood* (with its nifty 50s sleeve design) features a predominance of cool, laidback playing that allows the trumpeter and his new pianist Marcus Roberts to explore the music with remarkably rewarding results. Most of the writing is Wynton's own, with father Ellis contributing a particularly beautiful piece.

The paternal connection carries through to Branford's album, where Ellis not only wrote the first track but plays piano on it. *Royal Garden Blues* includes a wider range of material than *J Mood*, from the 1920s title track through to 'Emanon' by the trumpet-playing brother. On 'Shadows' and 'Dienda' Branford shows that, like Wynton, he is a master of the slow, dreamy tempo.

In some quarters these days it's deemed smart to denigrate the brothers Marsalis. Admittedly, Wynton does tend to run off at the mouth about the triviality of pop music and his role in preserving the purity of jazz. Moreover the brothers' youth (Wynton 25, Branford 28) and high level of musical education tends to smart with fans enamoured with the jazz legend of the unschooled genius whose craft develops through long years of dues paying. But to dismiss the brothers on any such account is fatuous, as is the notion that, because they avowedly see their music evolving within a mainstream tradition, potential listeners would be better off sticking with, say, 60s Miles Davis. (That's like saying you shouldn't rate Luther Vandross because we have Marvin Gaye!)

Both *J Mood* and *Royal Garden Blues* are excellent examples of modern, straightforward neo-bop. And the deep feeling for roots in this music helps supply its great strength, not any imagined weakness. If you're too hip for Wynton and Branford Marsalis, you're too hip.
Peter Thomson

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