

# RECORDS

## Siouxsie and the Banshees Through the Looking Glass Polydor

Though it's been a long time since there's been a Siouxsie and the Banshees album worth admiring, their cover versions to date (basically limited to the Beatles' "White Album") have always been tasteful enough. Perhaps then a whole album full of covers ain't such a bad idea; after all, Nick Cave got away with it last year, and the Residents' series of *American Composers* cover albums is planned to run to the year 2000.

*Through the Looking Glass* has the Banshees taking on the likes of Television, Roxy Music and Kraftwerk — basically the period just prior to the Banshees' formation in 1977, along with older songs from the Doors, etc., and a still older one from Billie Holiday.

Some of it works well: Iggy Pop's "The Passenger" suits Siouxsie's monotone, and John Cale's "Gun" is dramatic enough (in his version anyway) for the Banshees' purposes. Other songs, particularly a gross-out "This Wheel's on Fire," don't

come across as such inspired choices though, and the self-production veers towards a slick, yet sterile touch.

Like the *NME* says, this is the best Siouxsie and the Banshees album for years. But when you consider the quality of the original artists' versions (exceeded nowhere here by the Banshees) and the quality of those last three Banshees albums, is that really much of an achievement?

Paul McKessar

## The Cure Kiss Me Kiss Me Kiss Me Fiction

Catch Robert Smith with his pretensions down, and you'll find a rock and roll heart ringing with pure melodies. Too often however, it's hard to get at, hidden by the murky production of works like *Pornography* or the affected fey nature of *Japanese Whispers*. Coming to this double album, I was eager to determine whether that elusive spirit, found elsewhere in the odd inspired tune and Smith's fully-charged guitar licks, was still there, lurking behind the ponderous lyric sheet.

*The Head on the Door* had plenty of musical variety and panache (along with the lyrical equivalent of diarrhoea) but on the whole this is a stylised exercise; even where the

Cure try their hardest (side two's "Why Can't I Be You?"), the effect, though not displeasing to the ear, still fails to take a hold of the listener.

The major fault appears to be the dominant role played by Laurence Tolhurst's keyboards. Smith's guitar has always been the most interesting thing about the Cure, but it doesn't really get a decent outing on *Kiss Me*... He lets sax out for side four's "Icing Sugar" but there is little other derivation from the keyboard-heavy mix.

Side three is overall the most interesting music-wise, an effect spoiled by the dreadful routine funk of "Hot Hot Hot" and the most profound inanities lyric-wise; "and all I want is to hold you like a dog." Yuk.

1987's Cure: getting long in the tooth and short on new ideas; that, friends, is the long and the short of it.

Paul McKessar

## Neil Young and Crazy Horse Life Geffen

Okay Neil, so it has finally come real, the time has come to tell us the story of "life." It's claimed to be a return to form; he's done it before, so why not again? The man has, in the past, been one of the few to sense the mood of the times. Neil the love-

smith, the politico, the down and outer — he has pulled on so many disguises that you thought he had it sussed: big bucks, love, religion, politics, the American way.

"Mid-east Vacation" is one of those typically weird songs that he manages to write, you're not sure which side of the border he's on. "Watching Highway Patrol whittling with my knife" to the "Rambo in the disco / I was shooting with my feet." The American obsession with law and order — remember to read, their law, their order. "Long Walk Home" opens with the classic line, "If Liberty was a little girl... how would she like us now? We balance the power from hour to hour, giant guns raised." It is an anthem to America, poor little America fighting for truth and justice. I suppose we should imagine the mocking crowds as America winds her way to Calvary.

The album doesn't show him discovering new ground, though musically it is more acceptable recent work. "Inca Queen" and "We Never Danced" will have those old eyes watering. HM buffs will dwell on his pyrotechnical displays, and his devotees will appreciate his dig at Geffen Records in "Prisoners of Rock 'n' Roll." But no, I don't think this album is a return to form. We know Neil's admiration for Ron and nuclear

power. "Good morning America, how are you?" Canadian was once his response.

Tim Byrne

## Suzanne Vega Solitude Standing A&M

With "Luka" all over the radio, everybody now knows about Suzanne Vega. Last year there was only a small sprinkling of would-be cultists excitedly clutching her first album, hoping Ms Vega would prove the greatest thing in urban folkiedom since Joni Mitchell. This reviewer even nominated *Suzanne Vega* as debut of the year. Now, with *Solitude Standing*, I'm reassessing my expectations.

For starters Vega has changed bands. Out go the first album's subtle and spacious instrumentations that so superbly complemented her acoustic guitar. In comes a fairly standard lineup, synth centred and with a rockist boost to the drums. On a strong, conventional song structure like "Luka" it all works very well — the pop chart crossover has been attained. But on more introspective pieces the backing not only flattens out subtleties, it leaves Vega's voice sounding distanced, even passionless on occasion.

Then there's the songwriting.

Although Suzanne Vega covered an extraordinary range of styles, the overall standard was so consistently high that the album felt tightly coherent. This time out the writing ranges over 10 years and varies accordingly, leaving the album with an unsettling lack of focus.

Nonetheless there are some recent songs which show Vega's craft to full advantage. There's the paradox of "Luka": a catchy pop song about domestic violence (though I still believe its narrator speaks more like a wife than a child). The album's title track has similar success. Over a driving beat, Vega's cool delivery suits her image of loneliness as a ghostly maiden.

If one track encapsulates the conflicting values of this album it is "Wooden Horse." Drawing her inspiration from the true story of a young European man locked alone in a cellar for his first 17 years, Vega creates a delicate narration of seemingly mute eloquence. However the musical accompaniment of syncopated percussion accents and brooding bass almost tips it into dullness. An uneasy balancing act is finally achieved. On the evidence of this whole album, Suzanne Vega's future musical direction seems just as precariously poised.

Peter Thomson

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