

RECORDS

Brutal Youth Super Sonic

Sonic Youth Sister Flying Nun

There's a few people around who've had "Sonic Youth" on their lips for a while now. They're rich. It's either that, or they read the *NME*, and we wouldn't want to accuse anyone of doing that these days, would we? They scour the import bins, and on their \$20-a-pop travels, they've picked up the two previous Sonic Youth albums, *Bad Moon Rising* and *Evol*. "Blah blah blah, Sonic Youth," they go.

Well Flying Nun (NZ's own) gets the last laugh, cos for all of us that ain't got those other goodies (tho' I'm saving up for 'em...) they've gone and got the rights to release *Sister*, the SY newie, and it's the best. Better than the snatches I've heard of the other two. Better than anything else you'll hear this year. Awesome.

You can't help but bandy words like "brutal" around when you talk of the New York four-piece; as members of that city's avant garde post-punk "no wave" movement of the late 70s, their approach to rock music has always been an oblique one. They're just as prepared to attack their guitars with screwdrivers as they are with picks, but their development, culminating in *Evol*'s stark contrast between beauty

and malevolent white noise, has been steadily towards a re-definition of the territory of rock's outer limits.

Their disciplined sense of melody and a good tune enables them, with *Sister*, to achieve a synthesis between those disparate elements of cold beauty and ugly noise. This is exemplified in the track 'Cotton Crown,' where over a sculptured barrage of fierce guitars and primal drumming, Thurston Moore sings lines like "angels are dreaming of you" ... the effect of the words is enhanced by the odd interplay of the guitars and seething rhythmic undercurrent, making it one album's tour-de-force.

Sonic Youth's lyricism is deliberately understated ("come on get in the car / let's go for a ride somewhere," — 'Pacific Coast Highway'), their realism is dirty. No surprise then, that there is a mention of Raymond Carver on the inner sleeve credits — his claustrophobic vignettes of the darker side of American life work over similar territory to Sonic Youth's soundscapes: tales of schizophrenia, claustrophobic Catholicism and squalor, "keeping commission to faith's transmission."

Art and artifice go out the window however when it comes to songs like 'Catholic Block' and a cover of Crime's 1976 punk nugget 'Hotwire My Heart.' They're urgent songs, draped in an angry snarl of feedback — you even hear the band plug into their over-driven amps before the songs begin!

Sister's 10 chilling tracks may be an acquired taste — I picked it up at the first hearing though, and they ain't that far removed from fellow New Yorker Madonna; and in their own way, the Sonic Youth seem determined to become rock icons (probably so they can self-destruct in the limelight, though).



Give them a chance: buy their record. *Sister* is intelligent in its simple approach; not flawless, but challenging, more so than anything else you're likely to hear this year. Awesome again.

Paul McKessar

Dancing With Myself

Michael Jackson Bad Epic

"This is like Beethoven coming to town!" enthused the record exec, announcing Michael Jackson's local concert. But that's just dumb. Who said Beethoven could dance?

It's difficult to think of a cultural event so anticipated as this album.



metallic insistence, with sequencers going crazy. Luther Vandross knows you can fill a dancefloor without using rhythmic artillery, but subtle funk.

With Luther and Prince, Jackson is one of the innovative leaders of modern music, though no one could call him prolific (or a lyricist). What have we got to look forward to? Spinoff hits for months, and CBS again threatening the world's vinyl reserves this Christmas — though with a much worthier item than Bruce's five live. Get past the colossal myth, and you'll boogie till you get enough.

Chris Bourke

Pet Shop Boys Actually Parlophone Boy George Sold Virgin

There's something lacking beneath Neil Tennant's foppish vocals and vague lyrics; the Pet Shop Boys are, I suspect, the Village People in dinner jackets. If so, Frankie Goes to Hollywood must be green with envy.

Envious because the Pet Shop Boys are getting away with something they couldn't and envious because the Pet Shop Boys will, in the long term, sell more records. This is odd because Tennant and Lowe rate alongside Mel and Kim as one of the world's great ready-made duos and many of their songs sound nine months late. 'West End Girls' arrived with a rap long after anyone else and could have been an Al Stewart song. 'It's a Sin,' from *Actually*, sounds flat. Why dance to the Euro-beat of 'Heart' and 'One More Chance' when you can dance to Prince. ABC or Janet Jackson? Why put these men on your wall when you can have Corinne Drewery or Terence Trent Darby?

More interestingly, *Actually* avoids any distinct style of its own. The Pet Shop Boys' idea of pop *moderne* is to borrow a bit of Suicide here, someone else's lyrics there and stitch it all up with a topical veneer ('It's a Sin' was a three minute version of *Name of the Rose*) and bang! Instant top tenner.

Anyone else with such obvious affrontery has been shot down in flames. Like Duran Duran, the Pet Shop Boys are the band the critics couldn't kill.

Actually is all these things and less, and it will be a big success. The lads have even managed to get people talking about Dusty Springfield again by bringing her in to sing on 'What Have I Done to Deserve This.' Fortunately for all, it's a good song, as are 'I Want to Wake Up' and 'It Couldn't Happen Here.' Still, their success leaves my jaw scraping the ground. Why? How? What for?

Boy George, by contrast, is looking almost conventional. He's done the big hit, the big tour, the big good-album-which-nobody-bought (*From Luxury to Heartache*), the big drug bust, and now he's lined up for the big comeback, looking like a back issue of *i-D* and sounding, well sounding not all that bad. *Sold*'s title track is sullen and his cover of 'Little Ghost' is almost threatening — no mean feat for an artist who looks alarmingly like Jon Gadsby. 'Keep Me in Mind' could be a Michael McDonald track and side two's opener, 'Just Ain't Enough' is an up-tempo version of Millie Scott's 'Prisoner of Love.' Most of the other tracks are going for a very black feel, in both sound and voice (I wonder if black musicians like it or laugh at it?) and George himself has advanced way beyond the Malcolm Garrett artwork and image game. Maybe if he got a nice haircut and suit like Neil Tennant, and Neil Tennant dressed like a back issue of *i-D*, things would be more in their proper place. Boy George is the one with the good album and the Pet Shop Boys are the ones playing the pop game.

Not that difficult to grasp, actually. Chad Taylor

Public Enemy Yo Bum Rush the Show Def Jam

Def Jam's Public Enemy makes music that's like the original punk, almost deliberately inaccessible and parochial. It's for B-boys, but the message is dedicated to the proliferation of social nerds, glamour Gidgets and angry young Public Enemies everywhere: "Many have forgotten what they came here for / never knew or even had a clue — so you're on the floor / just growin' not knowin' about your past / now you're lookin' pretty stupid while you're shakin' your ass."

This hip-hop is a jerky, rhythmical drone, with a garage band guitar and wild, cryptic, breathless rapping. It's monotonous, and yet it's on the verge of dementia, a "toilet bowl" recording that's alive with the old sounds of hip-hop; the block parties of DJ Cool Herc and Flash, and their muffled, unsophisticated amplification. The rock drumbeat, the feedback and the furry, indistinct vocals. Hip-hop has never needed state-of-the-art equipment, and while this is only an

imitation of bad, it's good, and it's original and it's the best hip-hop album this year.

Public Enemy are here to knock some sense into the B-boy bump of guns and gold and fly girls. They've already de-capped the Beastie Boys, and they'll push the Beasties into acknowledging their role as the new American heroes. The Beasties with egg on their face because they're intelligent, but the idols of the idiot classes. The Beasties are the new Rolling Stones, bad and spotty and craving for some intellectual conversation.

Instead, Public Enemy will conquer the *Village Voice* and left, white America. Public Enemy are the semi-consciousness of black New York, a halfway-read Malcolm X, a riot going on in a dance. And while it's idealist proselytising, Public Enemy are not, never an Enemy, they're campus communicators and media controllers, Long Island cousins of the Sex Pistols. It's rock anarchy. It should be the best dance record you've heard. Yo! Bum rush the Public Enemies! MiUzi weighs a tone, Public Enemy are number one.

Peter Grace

Alexander O'Neal Hearsay Tabu

Somebody somewhere decided that this album would benefit from snippets of party conversation between the tracks — a bad idea. They sound like outtakes from *The Cosby Show* and like that show, they're amusing the first few times but cloyingly cutie from then on. Fortunately they're the only negative aspect to this record, probably the finest soul album to see local release this year.

Alexander O'Neal's 1985 self-titled debut album came out locally last year and sales were that of the proverbial dog, which was a shame, for those who chanced to hear it were as often as not addicted. Hopefully this disc will improve those sales figures: it's even better. Alexander is supposedly producers' Jam and Lewis's pet prodigy and it shows, they've held back all their strongest songs for this set, and the future of their own *Secret* project apparently rests with how well CBS do with this album.

I love the uptempo tracks like the first single 'Fake,' already a local club hit over the past few months, the powerful 'What Can I Say (to Make You Love Me)' and the new single 'Critique.' But it's the slow stuff that really chills me, when that voice really crunches home. Tracks like 'The Lover's Sunshine' and, most especially, 'Crying Home' are enough to tear me apart everytime. It's the way the man can turn around an everyday phrase and give it added meaning with just an inflection on his voice. I love it.

One of the albums of the year, no question. Simon Grigg

Marianne Faithfull Strange Weather Island

This album, her first in four years, is unlike anything Marianne Faithfull has ever done before. Consider the material. Whereas her previous three Island albums all contained a significant number of self-penned songs, here they're all covers. And what covers. Four are from the 30s, others from the 50s and 60s. Only two are brand new, courtesy of Tom Waits and a Mac Rebennack (Dr John) collaboration with Doc Pomus. Other songwriters range from Huddie Ledbetter to Jerome Kern to Bob Dylan.

The album's musicians constitute an equally remarkable cross-section. Normally the idea of combining a serene ECM guitarist, an avant garde pianist, Lou Reed's bass player and a classically oriented violinist would seem ridiculous. Here it works brilliantly, and that's just the grouping on the first track. To discuss the various attributes of individual tracks is beyond the space available in this review. But just sample Faithfull in a duo with Rebennack's rolling New Orleans piano. Obviously the song choice and arranging (all slow to mid-tempo) continue to foster Ms Faithfull's image of decadent vulnerability and ennui. Even the re-recording of 'As Tears Go By' — her first single is now 23 years old — gains new resonance from the life lived in between. That once high, breathy vocal has long since become a familiar tattered rasp. What is surprising on *Strange Weather* is that it somehow manages to create valid interpretations.

The inner sleeve carries an interesting note on how the album was conceived, by Hal Willner, the man behind last year's Kurt Weill tribute. The outer cover has a blurb by Kentucky-fried novelist Terry Southern in which he compares Faithfull to Lotte Lenya, Marlene Dietrich, even Billie Holiday. After one listen I dismissed those comparisons as inflated hype. Now, after many more hearings, I'll concede Southern has a point. Marianne Faithfull has developed into a genuine torch singer.

Peter Thomson



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