

RECORDS

Spare Parts & Broken Hearts

Bruce Springsteen
Tunnel of Love
CBS

It ain't easy being Bruce. After the overkill of the mid-80s, is anyone still interested? CBS's multi-hit album strategy for *Thriller* and *Born in the USA* was exemplary marketing, but also may have killed their two greatest artists' careers stone dead. Things backfired with last year's box set, where success bred excess. Once the excitement of hearing Springsteen live wore off, it quickly became an indulgent dinosaur. The lack of judgement reflected by its size and musical bombast ("WAR! THUMP! WHAT is it good for?!!" and "BOOOORN in the YEW-ESS-AY!") gave even hardened Bruce fans (ie, those who like all the car chat and references to "little babies") doubts.

But Bruce ain't dumb. Realising the folly of trying to write another album of hits, he's taken a left turn and returned with an album that's more *Nebraska* than *USA*. *Tunnel of Love* is an acoustic based album, with just the

occasional member of the E Street Band along to flesh out the sound of Springsteen's guitar, harp and light keyboards. But instead of the dark horror stories of *Nebraska*, *Tunnel of Love* is a deeply personal album reflecting on relationships and commitment (let's hope Chuck and Di are listening!). Post-marriage Springsteen is introverted, uncertain and reflective; devoid of role-play and Boss cliché, *Tunnel of Love* is utterly sincere.

True Bruce, then — and that, plus the lovely melodies and stunning restrained performance, is what gives the record its impact. Instead of the cinematic visions of the past, each song is like a black and white snapshot of a relationship. 'Tunnel of Love' evokes the tawdry fairground courtship; at his wedding, a son tries to cope with his father's expectations in 'Walk Like a Man.' In 'Brilliant Disguise' the insecure husband looks through his wife's eyes, "Is that you, baby?" he whispers, incanting his mentor Roy Orbison, "or just a brilliant disguise?" The fights begin and the birds forget to sing in 'One Step Up,' one of the most affecting numbers, performed with the album's consistent heartfelt delicacy.

Bruce needed to come down to earth, and he's pulled it off. The cynics have been waiting for him to become a self-parody, but unlike Van Morrison, say, who found his niche and made it a rut, Springsteen continues

to challenge himself creatively. After the numbing radio blitz of 84-85, *Tunnel of Love* is a re-affirmation of his talent.

Chris Bourke

Family Secrets

John Hiatt
Bring the Family
A&M

It goes without saying that in its best and most essential form, rock 'n' roll is live music feeding off the spontaneity and adrenalin of an immediate crowd response. Post *Sgt Pepper*, the studio, by comparison, has become a vacuum for perfection, an environment that hasn't captured the best on offer from the people like John Hiatt.

For seven albums he's turned his particular wit, cynicism and honesty into a drawcard that has put him in the drawer just above cult status and earned him tags like a "Stateside Costello." But whether it's *Slugline* or his last album *Welcome to the Ice Age*, his records have consisted of a series of set pieces — fine songs without the cement or feel to set into great albums.

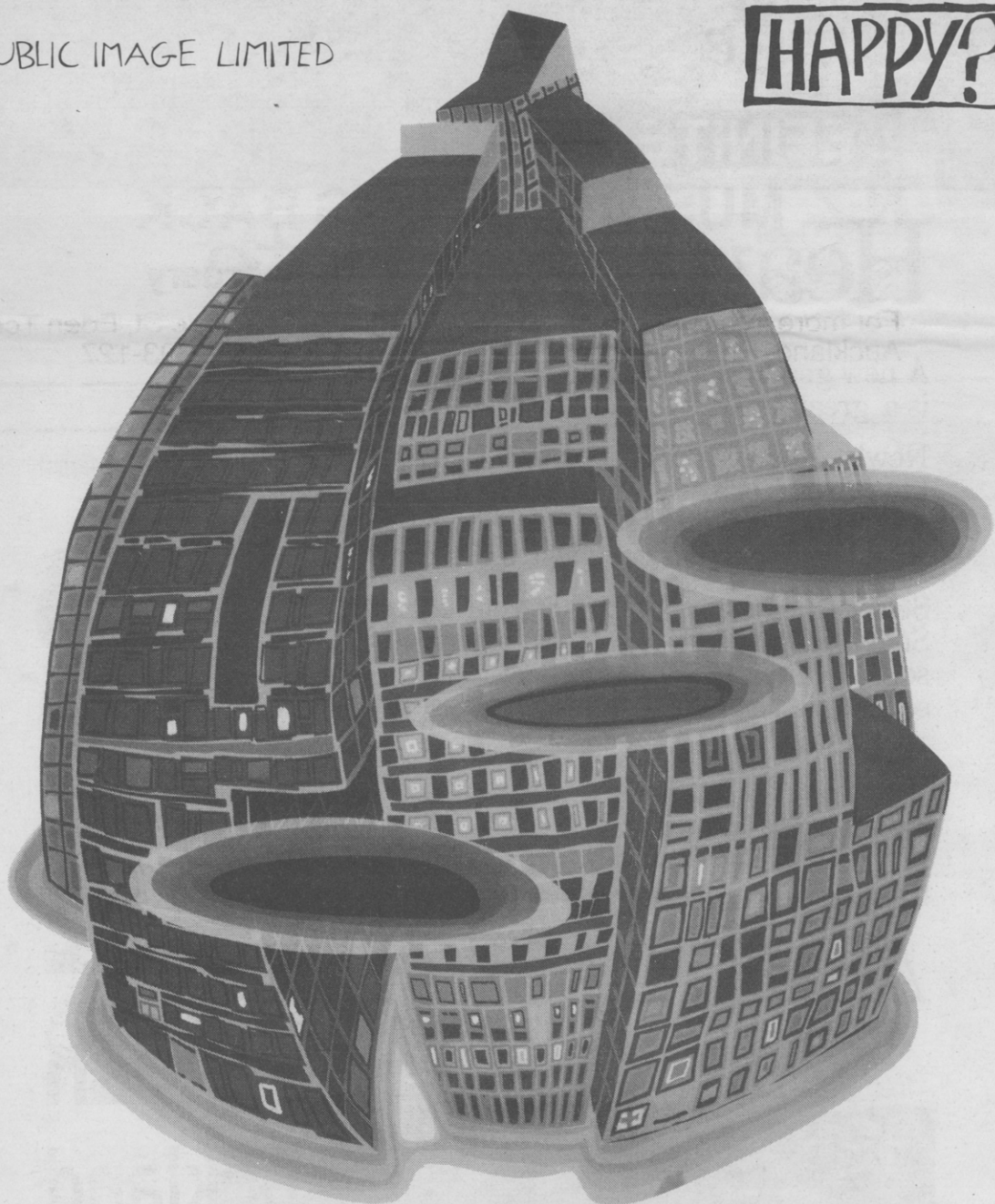
Bring the Family, recorded live-in-the-studio in a manic four days, is an attempt to put matters right and set Hiatt's songs alight with some raw-boned spontaneity and energy. Produced by John Chelew and using a



Bruce Springsteen

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band as tested and weatherbeaten as Nick Lowe (bass), Jim Keltner (drums) and Ry Cooder, Hiatt covers his usual bases with a tough assurance. Armed with Cooder slithering and sliding behind the vocal or leading the song, 'Memphis in the Meantime,' 'Alone in the Dark' and 'Thank You Girl' sound meaner and less doctored by studio niceties than anything Hiatt's ever managed in the past.

On 'Have a Little Faith in Me' he belts out a gospel plea that sounds like it was done in one take. The same could be said for the heart-on-the-sleeve confessions of the closer, 'Learning How to Love You,' where Hiatt almost chokes on the vocal. But the album's prize card has to be 'Stood Up,' where he tries to bend his tonsils around a bluesy ballad that Van Morrison would have loved.

So a new record company, a new lease of life — Hiatt's problem now is how to translate an album this natural, this vital, onto the stage.

George Kay

Shona Laing
South
Pagan

Several strong elements characterise this album. Even as you extract the disc from its sleeve the first becomes evident. With such an album title and a lyric sheet printed as an Antarctic map we're obviously in for an unashamedly Pacific perspective. Hence even the song 'Bishop' about South African Desmond Tutu can open with a Maori karanga. Not that Laing's writing falls prey to pedantry or easy nationalism however. Any potential jingoism on 'Neutral and Nuclear Free' is undercut by the song's joyous jug-band arrangement. Elsewhere Laing casts a cold eye on the death toll caused by our 'Highway Warriors.'

Another obvious aspect of *South* is the quality of the songwriting. 'Not a Kennedy' may have been the breakthrough single but there are several

other tracks equally as strong. 'Drive Baby Drive,' the followup, has a beat and hookline that should ensure equal chart success. The other tracks already mentioned are also memorable, as is 'Soviet Snow,' a reflection on the Chernobyl catastrophe. It's prefaced by a long orchestral passage that would be deemed pretentious were it not that the song and its performance are so powerful.

Which brings us to another factor: the production. Despite how good *Genre* was, when one returned to it after hearing the re-mixed 'Kennedy' something sounded lacking. This time out the sound is big and beefy, with Laing's vocals set well into the overall mix. Instrumentation is nearly all electronic, from the "violin" on 'Kennedy' to the skittering trumpet sound on 'Poles Apart.' (Brian Smith plays real honking sax on 'Highway Warriors' though.)

Ironically then, for all its impressiveness, the production also acts as a limitation in places. The arrangements are dominated by the pre-programmed rhythm section and Laing's singing is phrased accordingly. Consequently on some tracks her natural warmth is lockstepped by cold computerised precision. There are one or two songs here I've preferred hearing her sing live with only acoustic backing.

Nonetheless, there's plenty going on here to not only thoroughly enjoy, but — forgive the portentousness — to feel proud of as well.

New Zealanders have long expected the so-called "serious" arts to explore our understanding of who we are. These days of course, TVNZ is finally making some attempt at showing us ourselves. And now with bands the calibre of Herbs and individuals such as Shona Laing, it is clear that high quality mass-appeal pop music can be an equally valid expression of our culture. The best of *South* is indigenous art of international quality.

Peter Thomson

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