

RECORDS

the state of the ART

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Illusive

Rock'n'roll in the UK is currently at its most diverse and most volatile. Overnight you can become passé, the victim of a press shift in allegiance, and as a result few new bands are 'allowed to progress beyond the ideas expressed on first albums.

So new fads throw up new heroes, but under scrutiny here is a range of virtual veterans who've managed to sustain enough direction/determination to see them over the initial two or three albums. Whether or not the effort has been worth it is another story.

Fade To Grey

The road the Cure are travelling is leading to increasing musical-emotional inversion. *Seventeen Seconds*, as an account of a disintegrating love affair, was successful enough, but the dangers of pre-occupation with self depression were obvious in the album's morbid incompleteness.

Faith is a further retreat into the melancholic process of song writing and even though it has undoubted rewards, it is more obvious that Robert Smith has succumbed to the temptation of despair, romantic or otherwise.

The crystalline guitar sound of *Seventeen Seconds* has been replaced in many cases by Simon Gallup's firm bass lines and Smith's marriage of guitar and keyboards. The images ('Whisper your name in an empty room' Smith sings in 'Other Voice') and constant use of vocal echo behind synthesiser landscapes are alluring, particularly on 'All Cats Are Grey' and 'The Funeral Party', but they're also misleading. They tend to sentimentalise dejection to the point where it becomes an idealistic notion, a pained, lost artist persona.

Faith is a more consistent and more complete prospect than its predecessor, but it's aims are essentially the same. It is seductive and enjoyable, but its

equation of despair with profundity or importance is vacuous. So be warned.

Blooming Flowers

PiL have made it quite clear with their last two studio albums that they have little time for rock'n'roll as they see it. Their primitive obstinacy has been obsessive in that they've refused to conform to rock norms or general expectations.

Last year Jah Wobble left, taking PiL's famous bass sound with him and so now ex-drummer Martin Atkins and impressario Keith Levene have been forced to fill the vacuum on *Flowers of Romance* with pounding up-front studio treated drum patterns which provide the only rhythmic basis for the new songs.

A definite Eastern influence pervades some of the songs, especially Lydon's vocal on 'Four Enclosed Walls' which, apparently, broke the studio oscillator during recording. 'Phenagen' and the title track (culled from Sid Vicious' first band) also use mosque vocalese as the emotional core. On 'Under the House' and 'Hymies' Hymn' repetitive-hypnotic drum sequences are used to powerful effect and on 'Go Back' Levene's scratchy guitar reinforces Lydon's anti-fascist/apathy sneer.

Wobble isn't missed, in fact the absence of a bassist is an innovation as the music is more open, more accessible. Quite plainly this is their best album and, acquired taste or not, it must be confronted.

Make-Up

Visage are a manufactured concept, made up of two Magazines (Dave Formula and John McGeoch — now with the Banshees), a couple of Ultravoxes (Billy Currie and Midge Ure) and a Rich Kid (Rusty Egan). With fashion barometer Steve Strange they recorded this album last year, and, not surprisingly, the music is tailored towards Ultravox modernity. The songs are tightly arranged, catchy and well-synthesised, the sort of thing that radio stations often label as 'tomorrow's music'. In fact, it's nowhere music, it's quite soulless in its attempts at highly contemporary craftsmanship and the cosmetics of Visage cannot hide that fact.

The Art of Sinking (Without Trace)

The Boomtown Rats are another band who are full of sound and fury and who have



Pauline Murray and the Invisible Girls.

failed to live up to Geldof's mouthings. Their first two albums proved that they were adept at using old Stones' and rock-flash clichés in a contemporary framework. Geldof, master of the blether, set himself up as frontman, the character as 'charismatic' leader, the only thing was he got on everyone's nerves with his opinionated chatter.

Surfacing showed the band for what they were — a bunch of slick superficialists and *Mondo Bongo* continues this artistic collapse to the point of disintegration. The rare redeeming features, a Costello-influenced 'Elephants' Graveyard' and the relatively unaffected bongo of 'Please Don't Go', are the last weak gasps of a band who seem to have made this album out of some business commitment or for something to do.

Geldof and his boys are out of style and out of touch.

Feminine Ways

Talking of style, Siouxsee, and to a much lesser extent, Pauline Murray, should spring to mind.

Siouxsee, once the female vanguard of intelligent punk (*The Scream*) and neo-Nazi chic, is now as risqué as Blondie without a rinse, but *Kaleidoscope*, with John McGeoch welcome on guitar, is a vast improvement on the over-traumatic *Join Hands*.

Kaleidoscope is an album of easy-to-assimilate pieces with old Roxy Music tones used to fine effect especially on 'Happy House' and the commercial 'Christine'. Siouxsee still sounds distant but in command — notably on 'Desert Kisses' and 'Red Light', the latter taking a vocal cue from Jim Morrison.

This album proves that Siouxsee and the Banshees can use their ideas to produce music that is balanced, composed and still retains a sense of drama.

These qualities also apply to Pauline Murray and the Invisible Girls' first album. The two Penetration efforts indicated, if nothing else, that she had

sufficient talent to survive outside of the straight democratic band format.

Produced by Martin Hannett and using John Cooper Clarke's occasional band, the Invisible Girls, the album is an excellent first step in her solo career. Murray sounds more at home with this more thoughtful repertoire than she did with the often blunt dynamics that Penetration favoured.

Highlights such as 'Screaming In The Darkness', the single 'Dream Sequence', 'Shoot You Down' and Mr. X' are sophisticated in their use of power and melody and are sure signs that Pauline Murray's days, rather than declining with the demise of Penetration, are only just beginning.

So the kids are alright? Well some of them, particularly PiL, who brook no interference with their projects, and Siouxsee and Pauline Murray who are changing and even developing, two qualities rock'n'roll always needs to stay healthy.

Overall diagnosis? Fair.

George Kay

what ART?

Stray Cats Arista

This New York three-piece, now based in London, were the highlight of my television viewing so far this year, when 'Runaway Boys' first appeared. My set has been on the blink ever since, and bass has never sounded the same. Immediately, any sour taste attached to the word rockabilly as it appears in the '80's, was washed away, and now the album comes just in time to revitalize the taste buds.

The sleeve is superb, but the sound is better. From the great, loping bass lines of the first single (opening the album), to the closing jungle beat of 'Wild Saxophone', this record proves that rockabilly doesn't have to stand still and be watered down for radio play.



StrayCats, Slim Jim Phantom, Lee Rocker and Brian Setzer.

Baby-faced blonde Brian Setzer, credited with writing six of the twelve tracks, plays excellent Gretsch guitar and vocals throughout, Lee Rocker handles slap bass, and Slim Jim Phantom retains complete control of his sparse, stand-up drumkit. Limited? Well, you wouldn't guess it from the sound.

Production credits run five to Setzer/Stray Cats, and seven to the venerable Dave Edmunds, including 'Runaway Boys', 'Jeanie, Jeanie, Jeanie' and the new single 'Rock This Town', but Stray Cats produced tracks like 'Ubangi Stomp' and 'Storm The Embassy' leap out of the speakers with every bit as much power.

The Setzer/Phantom written 'Storm The Embassy' veers away from the generally social commentary to a political subject. The sentiments may be naive, but the song, whilst a little Jam-sounding, is bloody great!

On the other side is another Setzer/Phantom song, 'Rumble In Brighton', an observation on the English Mods/Rockers scene. The last line says no-one is a winner, and it's ridiculous to beat someone up just because of the way they dress.

Me, I'll just dress as usual and get drunk to both the Jam and Stray Cats.
David McLean

J.J. Cale Shades Shelter

Modesty is an unusual attribute in performers. The handful that are humble about their own abilities — as an example Kris Kristofferson is dismissive of his singing voice — usually have every reason to be so. What's much rarer is a person like J.J. Cale, whose work is infused with a natural humility that a lack of talent does not force on him.

There have been times when Cale's self-effacement is so great his music almost vanishes in the mists, but on *Shades* the mix of taste, minimalism and flair are in such perfect proportions I would rate it, as a long standing fan, as his best album since his remarkable debut, 1972's *Naturally*.

On *Shades*, much of the music has that beautifully evocative feel of songs heard for a moment on the radio of a passing car, through the open door of a hotel room, a mood touched for a moment and never quite forgotten.

Cale manages to weave his spells whether working in Nashville, on an instrumental 'Cloudy Day', featuring the sax playing of Dennis Solee that can only be called lovely, or in Hollywood, jamming with Emmylou Harris's old band on an improvised blues, 'Pack My Jack'.

There's even what sounds like a perfect top 40 song, 'Wish I Had Not Said That', that would add class to any radio station worth the name.

At a time when much of the music you hear may leave you untouched, an album like *Shades* is, as Smokey Robinson once wrote, "like sunshine on a cloudy day."
Phil Gifford

Skafish Illegal Records

Jim Skafish. Read about him three or four years ago. Very ugly; huge nose, tits, scars of adolescence and music to match. It sounded promising and now there's an album. Slick cover, all very nice. Is this a put on?

I don't think so. Jim's ugly all right, but like Paul's old granddad, very clean. And boy, does he like musicals. *Skafish* is a sound-track for some brave, new wave musical about being irrevocably on the outside of 'normal social life'. Very credible and praiseworthy. How many of you know what it's like to be teenaged and ugly, fat, scaly, dwarfed and so on?

Unfortunately, it's not a good record. It's not abnormal enough to reflect its lyrical content. Although Jim does try to make his music sound weird, savage and deformed, it just comes out strained and cluttered.

The verses of 'Disgracing the Family Name' aren't bad, Joe likes 'Joan Fan Club' and Australia could conceivably take the whole thing to its heart, but for a bloke who sings, "I am the rotten apple with the worms chewing at my core," it's all so very nice.
Chris Knox

FIRST SINGLE

penknife glides

TAKING THE WEIGHT OFF/ 'LAUGH OR CRY'