

Records

Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers Jonathan Sings! Sire

Jonathan Richman's musical history has been one of perversity. He was paying mean homage to Iggy and the Velvet Underground in the early 70s when nobody wanted to hear that sort of thing. Come punk and, after a rush of popularity, he turned away from it all and began to write nursery rhymes like 'Icecream Man' and 'I'm A Little Airplane'. Odd.

There aren't any nursery rhymes here but real songs and good ones. 'That Summer Feeling' opens and sets the tone, a bunch of audacious rhymes intertwined with needle-sharp images of sun, cars and school holidays. That sharpness is a feature of most of the lyrics — Richman doesn't have to reach out any further than arm's length to find things to write about.

Musically, this record lovingly echoes early 60s R&B. Hammond-type keyboards peep in here and there and the backing vocals from Beth Harrington and Ellie Marshall are simply sweet. The sound is acoustic, with a minimum of effects on the vocals or anything else. That said, it could all degenerate into amiable blandness but it *doesn't* — there's still that awkward edge to what Jonathan Richman does.

In an age where cold technocrats like Heaven 17 purport to have soul and records are judged on their production, we need individuals like Jonathan Richman to remind us what it's really about. You might hate this record because it's not clever and it's not sophisticated but, as the saying goes, if you're too cool for Jonathan Richman, you're too cool.

Russell Brown Miltown Stowaways Tension Melee Unsung

Tension Melee is the most aptly titled album round for some time. A celebration with a conscience? It forces its way out the speakers with city-wise energy of concrete and brass.

The Miltowns' first album is self-financed and features ten original songs. The raw funk of the band live is lost a bit, of course, in the transition to vinyl but the cohesive power eventually makes up for any blunt edges.

The album starts to run with 'Before The', frustrated vocals and a playful brass line working out well. 'Together Now' and 'Strong and True' spotlight the Miltown's social concerns. Given the benefit of the doubt the lyrics are accurately understated and the brass work again lifts the songs off. 'Strong and True' also appears as a 12" single and features vocals from former lead singer Fiona Anderson. 'Walk the Line' is definitely in the melee spirit, an



The Virgin Prunes

exercise in chaos. A tension release? The jaunty funk of 'Stare Them Down' completes the first wave on a familiar note.

The flip mixes things up more from the opening carnivality of 'Taste Explosion' to the final guitar-buzz and primal chants of the brilliant 'Pinpoint'. In between 'Acid Rain' is a lengthy workout which doesn't lose its way. Resting on a nice bass feel the song uses space and light to good effect. 'Tin Mugs' again has Fiona on vocals, angrily hitting out. 'Looking Glass' is quieter than its company with a jazzy feel leading into the frontal attack of 'Pinpoint' which no doubt is what the record is all about.

Working with tension is a dangerous game, leaving little room for variation. But the Miltowns fire from the groove with compulsive energy and record a positive step forward. Take the Trip.

Mark Everton Paul Young No Parlez CBS

Maybe it's just an old 70s hangover from the days of hype and poses, but I've always been a mite suspicious of overnight successes especially when the artist concerned doesn't possess any obvious brilliance and the record company concerned is working overtime in the promotions department.

Paul Young fits this bill. After a brief spell in a heavy metal band (but Paul's heart was always with Otis, Aretha and Marvin) his record bio hastens to add — where have we heard that before? he fronted the recently disbanded Q Tips, a hard-gigging soul mob who sprang up in the wake of Dexys. From there it was only a step to a solo career and his current first album, *No Parlez*.

Giving credit where due, Young is an okay singer. There's strength, depth and a touch of grit in there, but the album looks to cash in on the so called soulful sincerity that he's supposed to have plenty of.

With polish and perfection oozing from the technical aspects of the album, Young does make a fair fist of covers like Gaye's 'Wherever I Lay My Hat', 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' and 'Iron Out the Rough Spots'. And on a couple of originals, namely the finesse and urgency of 'Come Back and Stay' and 'Tender Trap', there's a hint of real songwriting potential.



Miltown Stowaways

But over the duration of an album the lack of bite and vitality condemns Young to being just left of MOR. And that means lightweight.

So, in total, we end up with a pretty face with a fair vocal talent and a massive record company. Tastefully ordinary, hello 70s. George Kay

Cabaret Voltaire The Crackdown Some Bizarre

Cabaret Voltaire have always been a challenge. Over a string of albums and singles Kirk and Mallinder have meddled with form and style making rock music that bears little resemblance to the flavours of the month. Dense, impenetrable walls of sound arrest, confuse and, ultimately, convert.

Now with *The Crackdown* the Sheffield wizards have attacked the mainstream. A logical step after the superb 2x45 set which also leaned towards a more accessible sound. The music remains an amalgum of disparate sounds: taped noise, rhythms that flick back upon themselves, one-off quirks of sound imagination. The essential difference is the construction of the songs. The vocals, no longer a harrowing echo, are distinct and audible, the rhythms are cleaner and, where formerly noise was used to assail at all times, space accentuates the main themes.

The effect is no less startling. These nine songs are seamless and intriguing. The title track has a stealthy menacing feel. 'Over and Over', a nightmarish repetitive journey on 1982's *Hai*, is here a lighter loop exploring thematic variations. 'Just Fascination', an off-beat tale of idolatry, has a slow motion dance beat and is as close as Cabaret Voltaire come to a pop song.

The Crackdown is eclectic and absorbing. This is the modern dance, the voice of today (and tomorrow). Buy it. David Taylor

Virgin Prunes If I Die, I Die Stunn

Firstly, congratulations Mr and Mrs Stunn on your new release. But if you are going to release such esoterica you should pay attention to detail. The band has made it clear in interviews that this album has no A and B sides but Blue and Brown ones. The NZ version has

sides One and Two on the usual Stunn logo label. Small point but not negligible.

Anyway, this is one of the better Irish albums of the past year. This Blue and Brown business is a pretty good description of the disparate sides of both the album and the Prunes' music in general. The Blue side apparently represents the band's live approach, if a little streamlined by producer Colin Newman. Songs range from a new version of the single 'Baby Turns Blue' through the Springsteen parody of 'Ballad of the Man' ('Spanish Johnny came in from the underworld last night ... He said do you wanna join my gang, I said you must be joking!') to a very Irish big production number called 'There for Thought', which you all should listen to at least twice.

Over to the Brown side, which they have described as "mystical" for four tracks that flow together to create something like a soundtrack for a film like *Savages*. 'Decline and Fall' is sheer magic, with singer Gavin Friday sounding uncannily like Sky Saxon from the Seeds and the following section 'Sweethomeunderwhiteclouds' is almost an 80s version of 'We Will Fall' off the Stooges' first (and by far the best) album. If you've never heard of the Seeds or Stooges, don't worry, grab the virgin Prunes and start to relive your present. (Snappy ending due to space restrictions, ha!)

Chris Knox Avant Garage Avant Garage Music Unsung

One of the brightest aspects of the local music scene in recent months has been Ivan Zagni's use of Government-sponsored work schemes to float ambitious projects. Avant Garage is more adventurous than the pioneering Big Sideways as its music is not directed at a rock audience. It's a brave experiment.

The ten-strong band play a wide variety of instruments including cello, bassoon, flute, clarinet, tuba, guitar and saxophone. That diversity shows in the music which cannot easily be categorised. It's not classical, jazz or rock although it owes much to all.

This potpourri of form varies from track to track as each of the eight songs on *Avant Garage Music* was composed by a different band member. That said, the album still flows fairly well as flute and bass provide continuity. The

songs showcase the musicians' undisputed talents, but are as a result occasionally a trifle indulgent.

The pity is that this album is unlikely to receive the recognition it deserves. By virtue of association with the rock scene few classical or jazz buffs will become aware of it. Equally, popular music fans will find much of the album (with the exception of Tim Mahon's 'Break It Up') hard to take because of its affinity with other music forms.

Avant Garage Music is an audacious and adventurous record quite unlike anything else local musicians have recorded. Listen to it with an open mind, but if you can't accept and enjoy music that doesn't conform to rock norms, save yourself time, leave it alone. David Taylor

The Nightingales Pigs on Purpose Cherry Red

Pigs on purpose? Yokels without synthesisers, drumulators or chic basslines and proud of it? Musical scavengers gobbling and shitting out other people's good ideas with a wide porcine grin on their clumsy faces? Wallowing in muck and loving it? Ah, it's neat fun starting off reviews like this. But! Only 150 words left.

All the songs sound familiar — the Mekons, Subway Sect, Swell Maps and a whole bundle of others have done better things from similar starting points. "Comparisons are odious!" you

scream. Yeah, yeah, I know. But when these things leap out at you they're hard to ignore. Nevertheless, the best songs stand solidly on their own merits, especially 'The Crunch' (great title!), 'Don't Blink' (on *Pillows and Prayers* compilation) and most of Side Two. Be that as it may there really isn't much that rises a great deal above mediocre, even though it's all done wif guitars and stuff and therefore appeals quite a stack without having to do anything. Understand?

Well, ya see, that last sentence lacks coherent, clear structure and so do Nightingale lyrics. On the cover some wimp's reading Shelley's poetical works but he's obviously learnt more from Mr Byron, who lapsed into clumsiness several thousand times in his short career. There's stories about the record biz and drinking whisky despite its awful taste and bread and fast food and I suspect bits are really good.

Whadya reckon? Would you buy this review after a record like that?

Chris Knox

Matthew Brown At Play With The Spaces Ode

This one's been eagerly awaited. Whether as musical director for Auckland's Theatre Corporate, cabaret accompanist or — all too rarely — solo pianist, Matthew Brown has been building a deserved audience. *At Play With The Spaces* presents a very attractive selection of music recorded during one day in a darkened Maidment Theatre (with only

producer and engineer as audience). The eight tracks contain, in Brown's words, "a mixture of improvisation and written pieces with a degree of cross-pollination between the two ... representative of the feeling of freedom derived from not having to write pieces of specific duration and content."

To attempt such a project requires considerable self-assurance and, happily, Brown has the technique and ideas to check an indulgent ego. His music precludes pigeonholing as it ranges from a wry, almost western ballad, through a Debussy (I think) inspired 'Arabesque and Toccata', to 12-bar boogie. Brown's well-honed technique, strong rhythmic sense, flowing melodic improvisation, and the occasional deft harmonic touch make the album very pleasant to listen to. Certainly more than intelligent background music (though it can be that too), much of it repays closer attention.

Sometimes, perhaps, Brown's reach exceeds his grasp, and in some of the bolder, busier passages the attempt at the dramatic comes off as rather theatrical. In the more peaceful, ruminative tracks his thoughtful playing is lovely. 'Billy the Parrot' and 'Celesteroll', for example, are deceptively simple and simply charming. So too — once Brown comes out from under the hood (that Jarrett-ish string plucking) — is 'At Play With The Spaces Part Two'.

Criticisms are minor however. Matthew Brown has justified the expectancy with which many people awaited his recording debut. One hopes that many more will now get to hear him. Peter Thomson

Hip Singles Play Up Hit Singles

The Hip Singles have long had problems with (a) subtlety and (b) song quality. Those two faults show up on this live record but they're considerably less glaring than they've been at other times.

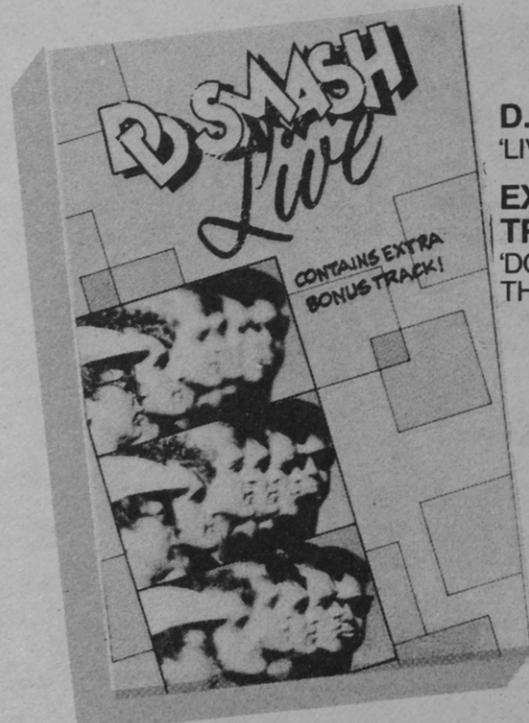
It was a good night, apparently. 'Broken Sleep' is a good opener — it sounds like it fits — but things get all heavy handed with 'Somewhere Out There'. Elsewhere, 'After the Party' and 'So Strange' sound, in some ways, better than they did in the studio. Typewriter sounds increasingly grotty and 'Barcelona' is dumb. 'Carpenter' borrows its theme from James Taylor's 'Handyman' but shows promise from Martin Morris as a songwriter. The cover of Vanda and Young's 'Wedding Ring' is short and brisk.

Charles Fisher didn't have anything to do with producing this one but the sound is truer and probably better than the DD Smash disc recorded on the same night. Hip Singles remain identifiably an "industry band" but at their best they've had a genuine sense of humour. With the band's demise imminent, *Play Up* stands as a parting gesture. If you were ever going to buy a Hip Singles record it would have to be this one.

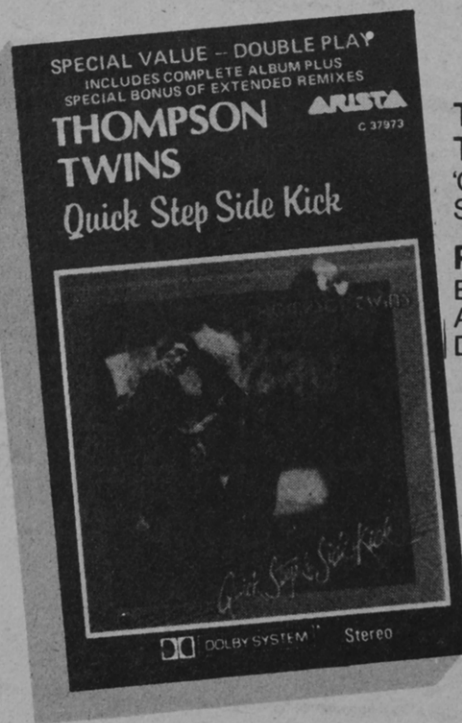
Russell Brown

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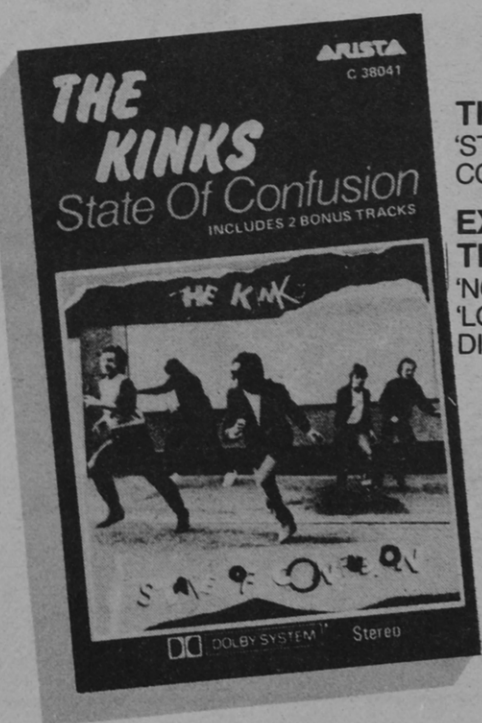
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THE KINKS
'STATE OF
CONFUSION'
EXTRA
TRACKS
'NOISE'
'LONG
DISTANCE'