



DIRTY THREE Torn and Frayed
(Shock/Flying In)

I was in a wonderful place when I started listening to this. I was sitting on a sun drenched chair, in a house on top of a hill, that looked out onto a blue sea and was surrounded by wild hills and lush greenery. I was alone and this music was playing loudly, and it all made sense, and I thought: 'I like life today.' Deep eh? Anyways, this music reminds me of that — this music is that. It's lush, wonderful and it smells good. This isn't no normal rock 'n' roll band, this is a feeling. The music consists of violin, piano accordion, harmonica, kalimba, guitar, drums and various percussion that twists and hisses, floats and swirls, with ever present heartbreaking violin accompaniment. There is no vocal, music of this sort would just be cluttered if it had one. Pure essence.

SHIRLEY CHARLES

STILTSKIN The Mind's Eye
(Warners)

Stiltskin took the offered short-cut to riches by supplying 'Inside' to Levis' TV and movie commercial. Here was an early 70s, hard rock

riff orgy, syphoned through a trendy touch of grunge.

The album takes its cue from this formula, with throaty vocalist Ray Wilson leading a tour through obvious licks that make up songs like 'Scared of Ghosts' and 'Footsteps'. Yet there's something endearingly oafish and reasonably dynamic in these post-grunge, Big Country-ish bouts of passion, and they even manage the odd touching ballad and an attempt at ambience. So there's some life after adverts.

GEORGE KAY

CREAM The Very Best Of
(Polydor)

There's a simplistic theory that this trio was to blame for heavy metal — that Cream slowed down turned into Led Zeppelin, which in turn slowed down and became Black Sabbath. And while the grinding plod of such tracks as 'Politician' may seem to support the argument, this *Very Best Of* contains vastly more evidence to the contrary.

Admittedly, only one of the 20 tracks here is live — their brisk take on Robert Johnson's 'Crossroads' — whereas it is often the onstage duelling egos of Clapton, Bruce and Baker that gets cited as evidence of proto-metal.

Cream's reputation may rest primarily on its perceived importance as a vehicle for three virtuosos who liberated rock for extensive blues and jazz inflected improvisation. Ironically, however, the tracks that have lasted best are a collection of three-to-five minute hit songs — 'I Feel Free', 'Strange Brew', 'Sunshine of Your Love', 'White Room', 'Badge' and the like — that most make this collection worth owning.

Shopper's warning: This album is not a re-issue of *Strange Brew: The Very Best Of Cream*, the one where the CD cover and liner notes were shrunk down from the original LP and were consequently impossible to read. This *Very Best Of Cream* has a decent and informative booklet, as well as six extra tracks (which may well be a couple more than you need). The album also boasts that 'all 20 tracks have been remastered using the unique Apogee UV22 process', which might just as well be a sunscreen for all the difference I can hear.

PETER THOMSON

EXCEL Seeking Refuge
(Malicious Vinyl)

Well, the re-emergence of a classic happens here. These guys were last heard of back in the days of the Venice scene — halcyon days of skateboarding and bands that were as much punk as metal. It was a happy time, before the music became neutered by jarheads, slackers and the pop aesthetic, before any kind of success prompted massive diatribes of selling out. Music was physical and fun and that's it. Now, Excel have reappeared with a nice mix of old and new. *Seeking Refuge* still has the adrenaline guitars and choppy thrash stylings, but there's room to stretch now. The riffs are coupled with blowout choruses and songs don't trip over themselves trying to be fastest. It's a solid album, even when the pace lets up for the 'we're all one in punkness' moments, but these get enlivened by the appearance of Bad Brains' HR helping out. Maybe not an album that will make you sing hosannas over the future of rock, but certainly nothing to be ashamed of owning. *Seeking Refuge* is quite simply honest, enjoyable and downright rockin'.

KIRK GEE

VARIOUS This Is Fort Apache
(Fort Apache/MCA)

Rock writing has often relied on labels to describe a vibe, sound, or feel. We've had Liverpool's Mersey beat sound, the Dunedin sound, the Seattle sound and countless others, so why not the Fort Apache sound? In truth, such labels are generally despised by those bands that are tagged with them — and fair enough too — but at least they can indicate a common inspiration point. For Boston bands of the late 80s and 90s, that point has been the Fort Apache recording studio. This one-time 16-track budget studio in Boston's Roxbury ghetto has grown to be one of America's pre-eminent recording studios. Now, a recently struck production deal with MCA records sees them launching themselves as a recording label in their own right.

This Is Fort Apache, then, is at once a beginning and an end — the first airing of the new label's first signing Cold Water Flat (who provide the excellent opening track 'Magnetic North Pole'), and an acknowledgment of what has gone before. And what has gone before is pretty special: seminal tracks from the likes of Dinosaur Jr, Belly, The Lemonheads, Buffalo Tom, Throwing Muses and Sebadoh, amongst others. The Brits even get a look in with Radiohead's 'Anyone Can Play Guitar' and Fort Apache co-owner Billy Bragg's 'Sulk'. The killingest cut of all, however, is the final track 'Off To One Side', by the relatively unheralded Come. I think songs like this used to be called

epic. While *This Is Fort Apache* serves its purpose well as a worthwhile and interesting curio, there's no doubt, from this assembled evidence, that Fort Apache the studio has served as something far greater.

MARTIN BELL

JAMES REYNE The Whiff of Bedlam
(Warners)

DIESEL Solid State Rhyme
(EMI)

Two Australian artists whose new albums attempt to mark a coming of age. Both have pasts they would clearly now rather forget — Diesel as frontman of stolid R&B outfit the Injectors, Reyne as Aussie pub-rock par excellence.

Recorded in LA with producer Stewart Levine, *The Whiff of Bedlam* is Reyne's first solo LP in three years. As befitting the title, it is dense, literary and ruminative — to the point that a song like 'Goin' Fishin' actually works better on the page than as a song: 'The days down in the tap-room / Blinking in the butter-light / The bridges hanging / With river mist and birthright.' Arthur Miller, Evelyn Waugh, even Patty Hearst turn up here, as do locations as far flung as Boston and Kathmandu. Yet it isn't until the last track, 'Day in the Sun', that Reyne's pop sensibilities match those of his pen, creating a sort of Aussie version of 'The Boys of Summer', and reminding us he is Australia's most critically underrated songwriter.

Solid State Rhyme is, in comparison, easy going. Diesel's songs often remind you of other, greater ones, and the titles here confirm it — 'Still Thinking About Your Love', 'Make It Right', 'Get It On', 'All Come Together'. Diesel is, of course, a good singer, a greater guitar player and, on '15 Feet Of Snow', a decent songwriter. It's simply that the songs hold little real emotional pull and, if you're attempting anything resembling soul, that's a drawback that all the production and promotion in the world can't hide.

GREG FLEMING

DADAMAH This is Not A Dream
(Kranky)

Mr Cleverguy here. I brought this simply because Kranky's first release (the *Labradford* CD) was so damn good. Not great critical technique, but it worked cause this is pretty fine too. It's apparently the total collected works of some NZers from the Port Chalmers vicinity, and although it's solidly lo-fi, *This Is Not A Dream* is interesting enough. As you'd imagine, there's a noisy vibe here, but they never fall prey to the 'noise for noise sake trap'. The idea

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