

# albums



Greg Johnson

**GREG JOHNSON** *Vine Street Stories*  
(Pagan)

Recorded over two years in the basement of Johnson's Saint Mary's Bay flat, *Vine Street Stories* is draped in a timeless quality that promises to have you spinning the album on your CD player for years to come. Now sans his 'Set', Johnson has adopted a more acoustic-based approach for *Vine Street Stories*, resulting in a vital, organic feel, that avoids some of the slightly mechanical tendencies of previous efforts. It's a sound that is typically difficult to categorise, no doubt due in part to the diversity of Johnson's musical influences.

As a trumpet playing crooner who's not exactly short-changed in the smooth looks department, the Chet Baker comparisons have been often and obvious. But such comparisons are not strictly accurate, as *Vine Street Stories* proves to be far more than a sycophantic *Lets Get Lost in My Basement*. Sure, Johnson retains more than a hint of that legendary jazzman about his tonsils, but here he comes across as more of a trans-Tasman Paul Kelly. Like Kelly, Johnson shares an innate ability for crafting genuinely memorable songs stamped with a unique character and originality. It's an indefinable quality that sets the likes of Kelly and Johnson apart from the also-rans, marking them out as something more than just capable tunesmiths churning out catchy ditties. While there's no denying a certain precise craftsmanship to *Vine Street's* finely etched performances, the album never lapses into sterility, appealing to the heart as much as to the head. That it can achieve this so emphatically and consistently is a tribute to Johnson's perseverance and considerable talent.

His languid vocal delivery manages to be cool, detached and soulful all at the same time, while the superb musicianship and instrumental choice add layers of depth and resonance to track after track. From the opening exuberant pop vista of 'Come On', to the delicate 'If I Swagger', Johnson barely puts a foot wrong. The last track, bar one, is 'Bent', which I suppose is a slightly more ambiguous

title than 'Fucked Up Puppy', but Johnson's alcohol-soaked vocals and piano playing betray the title's true meaning all too readily. It's a perfect note on which to finish the album, yet for some reason 'Makes Me Wanna Fly' closes the proceedings. A Hothouse Flowers meets aerobics workout hotch-potch, this seems curiously out of place amongst *Vine Street Stories'* more measured tones — Johnson's single error of judgement on what is otherwise a quite remarkable album.

MARTIN BELL

**TEENAGE FANCLUB** *Grand Prix*  
(Geffen)

**18 WHEELER** *Formanka*  
(Creation)

Masters Meet Apprentices introduces pop masters/geniuses Teenage Fanclub, who've been instrumental in keeping the classic nuances of pop alive and vital, and in transforming them into the current crunch coinage for the disposable generation. *The Concept* on its own validates their immortality, and for those who impatiently underestimated the slow burning glory of *Thirteen*, then the consistent brilliance of *Grand Prix* will bring the doubters back to the Fanclub.

As on *Thirteen*, the songwriting chores are shared fairly evenly between Norman Blake, Gerard Love and Raymond McGinley. Blake chimes in with some of his best slow groovers/ballads in 'Neil Jung' and 'I'll Make it Clear', and McGinley shows the excellence of his improving craft on 'Verisimilitude' and 'Say No'. But it's Gerard Love who pens the masterpieces. *The Concept's* 'Star Sign' was enough to ensure his deification, and on three of his four contributions here, namely 'Sparky's Dream', 'Don't Look Back' and 'Discolite', he hits that same sublime melodic pop ecstatic rush.

The title *Grand Prix* has probably spawned its fair share of hack music press puns, like formula ones, chequered flags, etc., so let's just say that, in terms of great pop music, the

Fanclub are out there on their own.

Apprentices 18 Wheeler are currently getting unjustly hammered by some sections of the press for ripping off Teenage Fanclub. They've certainly slipped through the door opened by Blake and co., and been caught carrying the same Beach Boys/post-grunge baggage, but these similarities are due to shared past influences, and not to a carefully planned desire to rip-off fellow Scotsmen. And, let's face it, brilliant, melodic, uplifting pop music can only sound a certain number of ways.

Led by Sean Jackson, the band delightfully explore the pop avenues open to them in 10 brief sound-bites. Brian Wilson would've loved to have written the beautiful 'Cartoon'. Elsewhere, the songs combine controlled buzz-saw guitars with Jackson's magic tunes and delicate vocals, to produce an entity that's idiosyncratically 19 Wheeler's — a band on the rise.

GEORGE KAY

**ALANIS MORISSETTE** *Jagged Little Pill*  
(Maverick/Warner)

While Madonna's recent musical career consists of a series of dropped catches, her 'vanity' label, Maverick, continues to sign winners. Having already released fine albums by Me'shell Ndege'ocello and the reunited Bad Brains, Maverick's current star is 21 year old Alanis Morissette.

*Jagged Little Pill*, her third solo effort, is considered a comeback album in her native Canada, where she was a bona fide teen pop star, but is looked upon as her debut elsewhere. And whereas Morissette's star first rose in the dance/pop charts, à la Kylie, *Jagged Little Pill* is being compared to Liz Phair's *Exile in Guyville* and Marianne Faithfull's *Broken English*, as a serious pop recording.

Throughout the album, Morissette ensures one thing is made perfectly clear, she is extremely displeased with the hand she's been dealt. Targets for her seemingly obsessive anger include ex-lovers, pushy parents, a dismissive business acquaintance, on 'Right Through You', and the Catholic Church. At various times, she adopts the chameleon approach of Sinead O'Connor, slipping from shrilled tones of frustration to soothing statements of repentance mid-song, but always retaining that hint of dissatisfaction.

Strange then, that the confrontational and abrasive tone of her lyrics should find a home enveloped in the hopelessly catchy pop melodies that come courtesy of her songwriting partner Glen Ballard (whose credits include collaborations with Quincy Jones, Michael Jackson, and Wilson Phillips). Yet the two have created a magical partnership, his upbeat drum



Neil Young

programmes and boppy guitar arrangements balancing her bitter diatribes, especially on 'All I Really Want', 'You Learn', 'Right Through You', and 'Head Over Feet', where the contrast in feels proves a true ear-opener — making *Jagged Little Pill* one to swallow, not spit.

JOHN RUSSELL

**NEIL YOUNG** *Mirror Ball*  
(Reprise)

Yes, yes, and Pearl Jam, although you won't find those actual words anywhere on the cover. In fact, this album may make you wish you'd never heard they were here in the first place, for this is certainly one for Neil Young fans, as opposed to being one for diehard fans of those young scallywags that did the deed with him, all those MTV Awards ago, on 'Rockin' in the Free World'. If the presence of *Vitalogy* and Vs. producer Brendan O'Brien gets you rooting for the board shorts team, you'd best tuck your flannel shirt in and leave quietly.

The 'hey ho, away we go' of 'Song X' is not the best track to open the album, as it crawls along with the occasional shove by almost comically deep-pitched backing vocals, thus almost managing to put one off continuing to listen. But never fear! Things pick up fast on 'Act of Love', and fairly sail into the infectious 'I'm the Ocean' (which opens with the glorious mortal coil wrenching: 'I'm an accident / I was a driving way too fast / Couldn't stop though / So I let the moment last...'), on which O'Brien pulls a pounding piano line that'll get you wigglin' in your pew. The pace keeps picking up for 'Big Green Country', where the words in the last verse are tricky enough to compete with Massive Attack's 'Sly' (not that I'm suggesting a collaboration here!). With my passion for



Teenage Fanclub

# Lenny Kravitz

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