

Music Reviews

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JO CAROL PIERCE

Bad Girls Upset by the Truth (Monkey Hill)

If you've ever had the courage to fall in love with a bad girl, you've likely left a good girl somewhere bitter, hurt, and angry. In that case, you fall into that category of men who bother Jo Carol Pierce even more than the ones who haven't taken the leap. But whichever side of the coin you fall on, *Bad Girls...* will rip your heart up and strip you bare. Buoyed by the needle-sharp poetics of a songwriter who can wound your soul and then dress the damage with honeysuckle, this disc examines the bittersweet ups and downs that haunt those in our midst "with a great capacity for love." Featuring support from co-producer Troy Campbell, David Halley, and Stephen Bruton -- among others -- *Bad Girls'* songs are poignantly surreal, two parts pang and one part twang with the whole homespun recipe cooked over a slow torch. As a successful piece of theatre with a Pierce(ing) narration, *Bad Girls...* was riveting. On record, Jo Carol and friends score big. The grit-laden honesty and naïve innocence that breed effectively in Jo Carol Pierce's voice ring just as true in her lyrics. Better still, *Bad Girls...* offers an equal dose of humor. Pierce's own "Buttons of Your Skin" as the bonus track is *the* clincher in a collection that already idles in overdrive. -- *Abel Salas*

HHH 1/2

ACEYALONE

All Balls Don't Bounce (Capitol)

In 1993, with the emergence of Snoop Doggy Dogg, Cypress Hill, tha Alkaholiks, Pharcyde, and Freestyle Fellowship, Los Angeles hip-hop elevated itself to new levels of wreck. Now two years wiser, the most cerebral participant in this movement of heavyweights has served a sureshot record called *All Balls Don't Bounce*. Aceyalone, who has put in mad work building his skills at the GoodLife Cafe as a member of the mellow-Fellowship and as the figurehead of Project Blowed, delivers verbal calisthenics that astound with fresh insight as well as lyrical wizardry. His concepts are rooted in the traditions of the West African griot, Delta skatman, and South Bronx B-boy. Complex rhythms by the Nonce, Fat Jack, Vick Hop, Punish, Mumbles, and Chillin Villin Empire complement Acey as he shuffles through various styles like Naomi Campbell doing a fashion show. Guest appearances by Abstract Rude, who possesses the smoothest voice in sport, boost the album to legendary status. Big up to Aceyalone, the universal soldier, who creatively pushes the musical envelope to expand the depth of hip-hop. -- *Rashied Gabriel*

HHHHH

AIR MIAMI

Me Me Me (4AD/Teen Beat)

Swirly pop confections filtered through an obvious love of ... Joy Division?! Yup. Bridget Cross and Mark Robinson's eponymous 4AD debut owes an awful lot to the classic JD drum and bass sound. It's almost as if New Order hadn't gone so far in the direction of clubland and instead opted for a shot at *Top of the Pops*. Between Cross' plaintive love songs and Robinson's more upbeat revelries (they trade off vocals on the

various tracks), Air Miami is a heady mix of danceable trivialities and serious longing. I cleaned my room to it the other day, and when I was finished, even the baseboards sparkled. -- *Marc Savlov*

HHH

GOD LIVES UNDERWATER

Empty (American)

Hollow industrial angst nearly as exciting as a papercut. Dead-on title, though. -- *Marc Savlov*

H

EMMYLOU HARRIS

Wrecking Ball (Reprise)

In the series of pictures on the cover and inside jacket of this album, Emmylou Harris holds the hem of her skirt and sways. It's just right: There's a built-in, skirt-holding sway to all these songs. Nice that despite the eye-popping group involved (Jimi Hendrix, Daniel Lanois, Anna McGarrigle, Larry Mullen, Jr., Lucinda Williams, Neil Young, and more), no one got too riled up. This cast of thousands produces 12 powerfully melancholy tunes that coolly, casually embrace Harris' voice. "Goin' Back to Harlan," written by McGarrigle, is a delight; I like this "Sweet Old World" better than the original; and Neil sings backup on the title track. Although the tempo is unwavering from song to song, a whole lot of territory is covered within it. -- *Kirven Blount*

HHH 1/2

JESUS CHRIST SUPERFLY

Texas Toast (No Lie)

Since their 1993 self-titled album on Rise Records, Jesus Christ Superfly have gone from quartet to trio and gone through some additional personnel changes, but that said, they still do the same thing: a timeless sort of "punk classic," full of anger and energy and made to be played at neighbor-waking volume. The fact is, however, a number of the songs on *Jesus Christ Superfly* didn't do that much for me, and I tend to be just as happy listening to the "Big Shit" single over and over again as playing the whole CD. *Texas Toast* is a real run-through album, though, nicely alternating the vocals of Rick Carney and Ron Williams from one song to the next, and laden with special treats like "Alice Cooper," a stern lecture to the young 'uns begging change on the Drag. "Night Time," their cover of the old J. Geils Band hit, doesn't really add much to the album, but neither does it bring it to a grinding halt. So play it all. This is the really good shit. -- *Ken Lieck*

HHH 1/2

AC/DC

Ballbreaker (EastWest)

When Rick Rubin produced LL Cool J's *Radio*, just one of the unlikely AC/DC records Rubin's made without the luxury of AC/DC themselves, Rubin gave himself the credit "Reduced by Rick Rubin." And if Rubin wanted to be forthright about how hard he choked with his heroes finally just across the studio glass, he'd again offer himself the same credit -- for reducing AC/DC's already diminishing capability for groove, clever double-entendre, and a listenable voice in Brian Johnson. Even the fact that Angus Young

still plays as if he didn't know the rest of his outfit has disintegrated, and that the blues-stomp "Boogie Man" is only half-stupid, can't make up for *Ballbreaker's* dumbest moment, "Cover You in Oil," a thoroughly embarrassing sex-as-art analogy led further astray by *Ballbreaker's* trademark of dull rhythms and awkward choruses. Ultimately, *Ballbreaker* is just the last piece of evidence as to the fine line between what made AC/DC great (simplicity, repetition, and attitude) and what they've become (boring, overblown, and dumb). -- *Andy Langer*

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SKUNK ANANSIE

Paranoid & Sunburnt (Epic)

If there's yet another British invasion, big money's got to be on Skunk Anansie leading the charge -- if only because crunch, rage, and soul are far more relevant today than Oasis and Supergrass' fab revisionism. *Paranoid & Sunburnt's* political and racial anthems not only make for one of the angriest British records to make it stateside since the Sex Pistols, but they also create a record where frenzied feedback, resonating riffs, and self-deprecating wit find their own reactive power in that anger's face. Vocalist Skin is the real story here, a true soul singer who's comfortable playing a black Pat Benatar. The fact that Skin can so easily balance slick melodies and churning grooves makes the album both oddly charming *and* downright revolutionary. And Skin knows it too, requesting "Save me from critical acclaim," on the record's centerpiece, "It Takes Blood and Guts to Be This Cool But I'm Still Just a Cliché," like she knows it's already too late. -- *Andy Langer*

HHHH

OASIS

(What's the Story) Morning Glory? (Epic)

My naughty, bratty little Liam gave me such a start this time around. Normally, he's all about pigtail pulling and Indian rug-burns. On the follow-up to the haughty debut *Definately Maybe*, our kid (as songwriter and brother Noel refers to him) is acting like a bonafide balladeer; even the fast songs are slow. Oh, his soul is still a black little marble and his vocals are as nasty wastey as ever, but he told me on "Wonderwall" -- and it pained him, I'm sure -- "There are many things that I would like to say to you, but I don't know how." Not much on the written page, I agree, but when you've been waiting for a tough guy to write you a love note, its arrival stings. And with the refrain, "Maybe, you're gonna be the one that saves me," you inwardly melt just a bit, while all the unloved cynics around you scoff. They've never seen the glory in the simple lyrical pop refrain, and so they'll never get Britpop, and certainly not its crowned princes, Oasis. The evil ones complain that they steal. Ah, yes, but only our Noel would have the ironic good sense to cop the opening to "Imagine," and then build it into an anthemic Wings ballad. Besides, he admits his thievery, calling you a cunt for not knowing what song he ripped off. Like the songs Oasis occasionally borrows from, is this album better than the first? Couldn't tell ya, couldn't care less. -- *Mindy LaBernz*

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UP AND DOWN CLUB SESSIONS

(Prawn Song)

San Francisco has traditionally provided an inspiring environment for classy jazz expression. In recent years it has been a springboard for modernized interpretations such as acid jazz and hip-hop fusion. Prawn Song has released two volumes of diverse material emerging from the Up and Down Club's

youthful assembly of musicians. Volume One is fairly tame compared to the genre-dancing demonstrated by Volume Two, but the work of Josh Jones shines on both discs leading an orgasmic Latin group in addition to his straight Jazz Ensemble. Seven-string guitarist Charlie Hunter stretches the concept of rhythm on his own "20, 30, 40, 50, 60, Dead" and an All-Star cut called "The Up," which also features Dred Scott on piano and Kenny Brooks on tenor sax. The late Don Cherry accompanies Hueman Flavor on two tracks that introduce the soulful voice of Scheherazade Stone. The Dry Look delivers a groove similar to the Brand New Heavies with "Mr. Puffy," and the Eddie Marshall Hip Hop Jazz Band serves a smooth portrayal of that down-home street funk. As a whole, the project is synergistic with the interaction of various moods euphorically overshadowing the lack of individual virtuosity. -- *Rashied Gabriel*

HHH 1/2

RICKI LEE JONES

Naked Songs (Reprise)

We are in the midst of the Ricki Lee Jones renaissance. PBS is producing a documentary on the singer which is said to reveal a seedier side of her life. There is also the recent outbreak of female singers who nod heavily to her style and attitude. Sheryl Crow, Alanis Morissette (with PMS, after a lobotomy and heavy doses of radiation) and, most obviously, Austinite Abra Moore. But Jones is not just a one-hit wonder via 1979's "Chuck E.'s in Love," which so saturated the airwaves that many people chose to run screaming rather than cozy up to the rest of her work. Those patient and forgiving enough to make themselves familiar with more than that foray into commercial overload knew that Jones was a formidable genius, the quintessential white girl-on-the-blues; and this live LP is superb, a definitive slice of Jones' almost otherworldly songwriting brilliance (she's got lots of Leonard Cohen and Jim Carroll in her veins). Most of the LP is just Jones and the guitar (and a tough guitar it is) or the piano -- hence the album title. The rest brings aboard Grateful Dead pal Rob Wasserman on bass. Jones caresses all the touchstones of her career and her rapport with the audience displays an amazing candor that translates well onto CD, creating a nice warm/cozy image for the listener. Sign me up for the Ricki Lee Renaissance. *Naked Songs* is its "Mona Lisa." -- *Joe Mitchell*

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THE SMASHING PUMPKINS

Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness (Virgin)

The tip-off came during a cover of Fleetwood Mac's "Landslide" on the Smashing Pumpkins' B-sides gatherall, *Pisces Iscariot* -- which, when coupled with the damning evidence of "Disarm," makes the clues and cues on *Mellon Collie*... all that more obvious; there's Elton John afoot here. Orchestration. ELP pomp. The *Seventies*! And though not nearly as obnoxious as the Elton element was on Guns 'n' Roses' 2-CD "artistic statement" *Use Your Illusion*, the ghosts of John, Stevie Nicks, and other vendors of Seventies saccharine are nevertheless all over this two-disc, 110-minute opus, proving that the pumpkin behind the Oz-like curtain, Billy Corgan, has a sweet-tooth the size of ELO. Corgan's talent lies in the ability to weave his melancholy through the fabric of an album whose title is better rejoined by...*and the Infinite Rage*, but that same weave can fall away in a hurry to reveal a sugar-coated cloyiness that comes off sappy next to angry and distorted industrial attacks like "Tales of a Scorched Earth" and "Love." Okay, maybe that cakey icing is linger-ficking good on the baroque "Cupid de Locke," but it tastes like tooth decay on "Tonight, Tonight," and while that duality will attract many, and there's plenty of meat before the desert table -- lots of singles, like the superb "Bodies" or "Zero" -- it's nevertheless gonna come down to how many lumps of sugar you like with your music. Remember, they said *Exile on Main Street* was "muddy" when it came out. -- *Raoul Hernandez*

HHH 1/2

FOR SQUIRRELS

Example (550/Epic)

Like Mother Love Bone, For Squirrels were about to get the major-label push before things went straight into the ground. Instead of losing singer John Vigliatura to the syringe, however -- as was the case with MLB's Andrew Wood -- For Squirrels' distinctive voice and chief asset suffered a more tragic death; he died when the band's tour van rolled, killing him, bassist William White, and the group's tour manager. Musically speaking, what was lost was perhaps not the cost of a human life; a great approximation of early R.E.M. that would fit nicely in a set with the Gin Blossoms, Toad the Wet Sprocket, and Sponge. A solid, piece of work with lots of commercial potential. Only now, instead of all that Epic/Sony/Japanese money working potential singles like "Under Smithville" and "Orangeworker" (even the titles are R.E.M.), this album will most likely be interred in the cut-out bin. Sad. If a tree falls in the forest... -- *Raoul Hernandez*

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