

THUGS

International Anti-Front (Alternative Tentacles)

Thugs are a band to be grateful for. They restore the ethos—and punk clamor—to current rock. Yet in this core element they wrap a buoyant personality and plenty of psychedelic expansion. The band hail from Angers, one of the smaller French cities, and they seem resolutely international. They tour here yearly and they record in England; and whenever they listen to, you can bet it ain't Euro-pop. The only "French" input that's noticeable is some of the phrases that sound like they were recorded off the PA and inside nightclubs at closing.

The album-title initials mean International Anti-Front. But there is nothing frivolous about the band's stance. Rushing drums, filmic harmonies, and a pleasantly nitrous mix cannot obscure the musical candor and intelligence of the Thugs' lyrics. My favorite song, "And He Kept On Whistling," describes injustice is succinctly described in less than a minute. Lines, followed by perhaps the only immediate payoff: "Dance with us." Over a distant, old-fashioned whistling track, they sing, "We have always in our mind the dream of a beautiful night when we could dance on the ruins of this boring old world." —

Drumm

CRABSTICK

Crabstick or Houseboy? (Feel Good All Over)

Crabstick! Tell me who the Curly Man is? Intense scrutiny squandered on obscure projects. And it's about time. I'm not suggesting them as candidates for the Dr. Demento show—but they do have an eye for the odd. The members of Crabstick would no doubt be mortified to hear it, but this is a weirdo band that actually holds interest and has songs of lasting beauty.

Sashaying in at about a billion songs, *Stud or Houseboy?* reaches musical conclusions both cerebral and camp. The screery violin of "Bunny" provides the deadpan backdrop to a monotone dream counter. The saltshaker rhythm of "Crab Apple" gives it a license to hum or holler that never expires. Are they sarcastic monks or humble-hearted choirboys? The mystery of Crabstick remains intact. And how ye near this record cover to behold Michael Stroh's cool *tromp l'oeil* hairdo. It looks like he's wearing a coonskin cap, but it's really his hair.

—Lois Maffeo

LADY LEVI

The Legend of Lady Levi (Motown)

Lady Levi premieres from Jamaica/USA with the lower bass man of Soul II Soul, Jazzie B, dropping notes for her alongside star Jamaican dancehall production team Steely and Cleve and American hip-hop scissormen Terry Morris and Tony Dalla.

The Legend of Lady Levi is itself the debut presentation of Jazzie B's Funki Dreds label, set to collect the best of dance and culture worldwide for cool feet in your house and every hemisphere—like Lady Levi says, "Looking for the Dope Beat."

Wherever it is, that's where she goes; walking down the street, at the dance, or listening to the radio, Levi seeks out the bass. She's able to shift her musical personality between Jamaican and US



Love for Free

LAURIE FREELOVE

Smells Like Truth (Ensign/Chrysalis)

When the soft-spoken Laurie FreeLove left Two Nice Girls a couple of years back, some folks thought she'd drop out of the music biz and go back to a quiet life teaching rudiments of music to second-graders. Then her first post-2NG band, 50 Words for Snow, blasted the local Austin scene. The same people wondered how she'd continue a musical career without the sacrosanct band she helped nurture into a cult phenomenon.

50 Words for Snow was short-lived, but FreeLove persevered. Last spring, her self-produced demo caught the ears of A&R types at Austin's South by Southwest Music Conference. Chrysalis subsidiary Ensign won out, and the result is *Smells Like Truth*.

I was a vocal member of the detractors' club. But this album makes it clear that I didn't know the real Laurie FreeLove. After a single listen to the title track, I realized she must have felt out of place as a Nice Girl. Whereas the Girls are campy and satirical, FreeLove is deep and contemplative. There are no snappy ditties about lesbianism here—FreeLove goes for the jugular vein. The result is an often eerie, thickly layered, cathartic meditation on desire and self-doubt that drags the listener along. It could be a world-weary Piaf colliding with whimsical Kate Bush vocalizations, produced by Brian Eno.

Not a track misses (though "Heaven on Earth" disconcerted a bit: I thought a Sugar Cubes song had been stuck on my advance tape). "Arms of a Dream" and "White Hail" stick out, as well as the title song. But concentrating on the context (no casual listening) is essential to enjoy this. FreeLove builds a mood, hammering out her feelings. It's enrapturing. As for my previous eschewing of FreeLove, a penalty is in order and ten Hail Lauries are due.—Joseph Mitchell

styles—she has the voice of a jazz singer; her toasting is expert scat, and her rap is as deadpan as Billie Holiday's dying soul.

"Why Do They Fight" and "Reality" are melancholy portrayals of hardcore ghettos, clashing drastically with the smooth dance shuffle of the oh so

steady bass. "Oh Jenny" is a straight b-girl tale about "jimmies," followed by the sexy ragamuffin hip-hop of "Levi's Leisure," then falling into the heaviest bass scene of all—hardcore Jamaican dancehall—for "Rude Boys" and "My Lover Lover." Her theme song, "The Legend of Lady Levi," is a singalong in UK