

Austin Chronicle
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TORI AMOS

Backyard, August 13

It's obvious from all the crotch-grabbing, leg-spreading, and cooing Tori Amos directed at her audience, that she's no less a rock chick now than in 1988 when she released the disastrous glam-rock album *Y Kant Tori Read*. The night started in an inauspicious rush of arena rock clichés. In a contrived paean to Mary Magdalene, she told an anecdote about how as a young girl she informed her grandmother that she wanted to figuratively nail Christ. This brought calculated whoops from the crowd. And when she said, "It's so good to be in this town," you almost got the impression that her mind was racing to figure out which town she was in.

But Amos did her best to balance the dichotomy of her show - the same dichotomy she says exists in her soul: the Vampire (the taker, the bloodsucker) and the Nightingale (as in Florence - the nurturer). When the lights started swirling and some pre-recorded tracks for "God" droned over the PA system, the intimacy of Amos' one woman/one piano show was shattered. The Vampire took flight. The duration of the MTV hit was almost unbearable. I was aghast at how far down the commodification process can drag a truly unique artist.

The lights stopped twirling and faded. Amos closed her legs and turned away from the crowd to the piano for a moving version of "Silent All These Years." It was the high point of the show. The Nightingale sang. The remainder of the show was a flip-flop between the two extremes. The most irritating travesties of sound and light were represented by "Girl" and "Cornflake Girl"; the most cathartic moments were by "Crucify" and "Icicles." Still, the vampire emerged stronger. The purer moments were too few and the overall show came across as a hollow execution of form over substance. Amos can only do herself justice by dropping all the rock & roll trappings and concentrating more on creating live music than major label product. This will be the only way she can convey the same magic live that is so prevalent on her recordings.

- Joseph Mitchell

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SEBADOH, PORK

Liberty Lunch, October 4

Sebadoh are a cute puppy who've grown-up to be an even more endearing mutt. The Sebbies may have moved from the four-track to the mega-track studio, but their LPs remain as playful and adventurous as if they were still in ol' Lou's bedroom. At the Lunch, the True Lou Crew demonstrated they can have fun in a live context, too. The normally glum, self-contained Lou Barlow actually smiled like a madman through most of the set despite numerous technical problems, and a very loud heckler who kept requesting Dino Jr. songs. Lucky for the asshole, the show was so good that no one bothered to kill him. A big reason for the show's success was bassist Jason Lowenstein. His cig-bumming, tough-guy persona balanced out Barlow's Mr. Sensitivity as he took over vox duties on the last and most exciting third of the set. No doubt Barlow is the genius here, but Lowenstein added the sparkle to this show. Lou had best keep him happy so he doesn't go off and form yet another Western Mass splinter group. Pork opened. Their Cramps-meet-Runaways-meet-Butthole Surfers-meet-Phil Spector wet dream in a Russ Meyer flick sound is giddy fun. But their wooden presentation just makes you think these chops aren't quite done yet! - Joseph Mitchell

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MELVINS

Stoner Witch (Atlantic)

Ten years old and Los Melvinos are pickin' up the pace and we ain't talkin' picante sauce. Tempol! Tempol! Tempol! They actually sound speed metal on several tracks. But never fear Melvins fans of yore, they haven't ditched their snail-on-Valium sludge for good. The coolest track, "Shevil," is definite West Texas Crude. As those Melvins are wont, this LP regresses into general mayhem beyond track six, turning more into a soundtrack for Syd Barrett's nightmare than a group of songs. But, hey, it's the Melvins, right? Right. This paler cousin of *Houdini* will probably be their last offering for Atlantic unless the entire world goes mad, and hails them as the second coming of their pals Nirvana, which they ain't. Cobain wrote songs. King Buzzo paints vignettes of Jerry Lewis in hell. Don't worry, though. Grunge may come and go, but the Melvins go on forever. *Gracias a dios. (The Melvins play Liberty Lunch Monday 31.)*

- Joseph Mitchell

★★½

Austin Chronicle
12-9-94

TEXAS INSTRUMENTS

Speed of Sound (Doctor Dream)

Here is yet another offering from a bunch of locals who've been at it since the mid-Eighties on a Southern California label, which has been nothing but a dumping ground for the wretched refuse of American pop since losing a couple of key bands in the early part of this decade. Unfortunately, the local heroes' bland folk/jangle pap fits in all too nicely. The Instruments may have been a band with potential in 1985, but by the sound of this record, they've been running in place for almost ten years. The Dylan and Petty-isms are as old and tired as their namesakes, and the electric Weavers sound has been recycled one too many times by 1,000 too many people. The songs are nothing but stale metaphors and "cooler than thou," arcane references. The best track is a cover. As far as this record is concerned, the speed of sound just isn't fast enough.

- Joseph Mitchell

★

WANNABES

Mod Flower Cake (Dejadisc)

This reviewer thought for sure that the ol' 'Bes were hopeless, if not on the verge of done. But *Nuevo Sincero* veteran John Croelin has managed to refine this barrel of Texas crude into something with more melodic octane than 20 Smashing Pumpkins in a tank of Pearl Jam. Beneath the rowdy-boy, Seventies-hugging exterior, the Reiver has found potent substance, yet hasn't completely tossed the trippy wrapping paper. The sound here is akin to a dyslexic, bipolar byproduct of a Doctor's Mob/Cornells head-on. Dialectic has rarely been so beautiful. The songs here are exquisite, with nary a clinker. "Here Lies Saturday" is a gem, and deep, reflective laments with titles like "Dark Side of the Moon Fight Song" and "The Ballad of John and Brian Epstein" demonstrate the band has matured without losing its funky sense of humor. I'll put my fork away.

★★★1/2

- Joseph Mitchell

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DAR WILLIAMS

Chicago House, Thursday 16

I'd never heard a note from Williams prior to this show, but a recommendation from a friend had me curious. It was easy to identify with Ms. Williams. As I discovered throughout the set, like me, she was born in the Sixties, raised on Seventies trash culture, and weened on Eighties punk. Yet her appeal went well

Dar Cont'd

beyond the surface. My heart swelled and tears welled in my eyes when a seemingly kitschy song about a hippie babysitter made a sudden swerve into a poignant heartbreak lament. Williams likes to work intensively on the listener's emotions. I really like that. Less than three songs into her set at Chicago House, it was evident why the short-statured reformed tom girl from Boston played from the back left-hand corner of the stage rather than front and center like all the other acts. Sniffles reverberated throughout the room and tears were running down cheeks from the bottom to the top rows. If she'd been any closer to the audience, a heart could have well burst. Her placement on the stage was in the interest of public safety. Williams stuffed as much material from her *Honesty Room* album as she could into the unfortunately short 30-minute set. "The Babysitter's Here," "When I Was a

Boy," and "The Great Unknown" took the hardest tugs at the heartstrings. "Alleluia," an upbeat song about Williams' days as a high school punker, was a slight reprieve for the crowd before she got weighty again with "You're Aging Well" and "Arrival." Despite the emotionally draining nature of Williams' repertoire, the crowd gladly gave a standing ovation and got an encore in return. I didn't need to see any more music this night. Dar was my "discovery" of the conference.

- Joe Mitchell

VINCE BELL

Chicago House, Saturday 18

This was the night of the swamp fairy and the bionic man. The fairy stood slightly shrunken and gnarled from her fight with a debilitating disease while the bionic man sat on a stool scarred and stiff from a near fatal accident. Despite the physical shortcomings, the fairy and the b-man were the most ebullient souls to grace a stage at this conference. The fairy was Victoria Williams, who helped provide backup vocals for the b-man, Vince Bell. The upstage was packed. Admission was halted ten minutes before the show. Bell cheerfully complained from the stage to the management to let in his friends who were waiting outside. Despite the stature of his stranded friends, which included the two biggest wigs at Bell's label, no one else got in. Bell was on target despite not getting his way, proving himself a consummate performer. This reviewer watched Bell make eye contact with everybody in the first four rows while rendering picture-perfect versions of songs from his long overdue LP, *Phoenix*. The shiniest numbers were "The Hard Road" and "Girl Who Never Saw a Mountain," on which Williams joined him. Bell had a big smile on his face throughout and so did everybody else in the room. For those friends that didn't get in, Bell and Williams graciously did an impromptu set in front of the club of four numbers before being rudely halted by a badge-bearing Chicago House official who probably had no idea just whom she was braguely interrupting. One man shouted, "Austin, the anti-live music capitol of the world!" in response. Bell and Williams just sort of wrinkled their foreheads and laughed the whole thing off. I was probably the most furious person there, realizing that at the rate Bell's career is taking off, no one in the world may ever get a chance to see him perform in such a spontaneous environment again.

- Joe Mitchell