

# in brief **avant rock**

Reviewed by David Keenan

## Jessica Bailiff *Hour Of The Trace* KRANKY KRANK038 CD

Alan Sparhawk of majestic slow-mo rockers Low recorded Bailiff's second album in Bob Dylan's hometown, Duluth, Minnesota. Still broadcasting from beneath the sweetest layer of fuzz, Bailiff's vocal/organ tone swirls recall the comedown sound of the Paisley Underground as conceived by the likes of Kendra Smith and David Roback's Opal. *Hour Of The Trace* has a rare, dislocated air: drums that softly beat to nowhere, guitars hovering in suspension. The album's highlight, "Crush", sounds like The Pastels marching against heavy g-force.

## Jad Fair And The Shapir-O'-Rama *I Like Your Face* WIRE MONKEY WRM001 CD

These days the mere whiff of a Jad Fair collaboration is enough to get even the hardiest Half Japanese flagwaver sweating. He's made so many average records recently that it's hard to sustain that same one-time buzz about his work. Without a strong controlling hand he's liable to fall back on the same old routines and oneliners he was cracking ten years ago. Fortunately the guitar-led four piece Shapir-O'-Rama don't entirely defer to Jad, forcing from him one of his best performances in years. For their second head-to-head (see also *We Are The Rage* on Avant), Kim Rancourt howls alongside Jad, and the presence of Jad's tag-team regular Don Fleming ensures that the session really burns. Their breakneck take on John Fahey's "Death Of Clayton Peacock" is this album's jewel.

## Haunted House *Up In Flames* ERSTWHILE 002 CD

Haunted House is Loren MazzaCane Connors's much anticipated group, featuring

Suzanne Langille on vocals, Andrew Burnes on second guitar and Neel Murgai on percussion. Langille wrote two of the three monstrous tracks, the third being a cover of Lonnie Johnson's "Blue Ghost Blues". They all permit MazzaCane plenty of space to roam. The 23 minute "Been So Long" is dominated by his solo 'dialogue' between two separate voicings, where he alternates slow, surging and quivering downstrokes with frail, tremulous speechnotes. Langille's entrance is so unexpected it's unnerving, her voice this time dark and ominous as it descends from the clouds. With MazzaCane firing epic, heart-wrenching blues arcs into the blackness, this is one of his most dramatic records.

## La Gloria *Jeremiad* FURRY BEAR/FREEDOM FROM FBR002/FF CD

La Gloria are a New Zealand duo, David Coventry and Marcel Bear, who create stoned zones of static drone and slow, sad professionals from a collection of homemade implements, record players, tapes, violins and guitars. The dark, singsong vocals and mumbled exhalations make the record sound like it was soaked in the same deep acid that damaged Skip Spence's *Oar*. The more minimal pieces are the aural equivalent of a thousand yard stare, where even the silences seem psychotically charged. Narcoleptic trance never felt so invigorating.

## Microphones *Don't Wake Me Up* K KLP99 CD

Formerly an associate of awkward teen rockers Some Velvet Sidewalk, Phil Elvrum now drums for labelmates D+ and Old Time Relijun. Here is his messily mounted collage of home recordings. This home-spewed confessional schtick is undoubtedly a hairy one. Broadcasting the nerdy minutiae of your life is fine if the details are interesting

enough to share with the world, but Elvrum is so intent on getting over what a mysterious mad geek he is, self-consciously dribbling crap tape buzz and blocks of puny noise over bog-standard weeping songs, that he ends up sounding numbingly normal. Get up and tidy your room.

## Marianne Nowotny *Afraid Of Me* ABATON 001 CD

Between holding down a part-time post in a New Jersey Burger King and attending high school, 16 year old Nowotny has produced a debut CD of disturbing beauty. Recorded on a couple of cassette recorders, *Afraid Of Me* runs the gamut of Tim Buckley-like choral warbling, incantatory Patti Smith-isms and operatic little-girl pop. Her strangely tilted aesthetic drops seriously woozy and detuned keyboards in tonally inappropriate positions to create haunting harmonics that send out confusing emotional signals. The title track crackles with dark sexual tension mixing longing and regret, while "Crackerjack Necrophiliac" babbles shamanistic beat poetry over a broken, out of time piano waltz. This marriage of cute DIY moves and seriously airy dramatics is as unique as it is unsettling.

## Pavement *Major Leagues EP* DOMINO RUG96 CD

Pavement do not deserve their reputation as soulless conceptual jokers and king ironists of American alt.culture. It's true that they're considerably 'wiser' than a lot of their acolytes in the way they document and deal with rock success, but as anyone intimate with rocklore will tell you, it's all an ephemeral crock. Pavement certainly do. They document their experiences as 'rock-product' in a human, non-cliched way, while simultaneously evoking melancholic teenage vistas of skateboarders and autumnal playing fields. Taken from *Terror Twilight*, "Major Leagues" is both a rumination on standing at the cusp of overground success and a nostalgic song of teen longing, of waiting for life to begin. More worrying is the awful cover of cornball rockers Echo & The Bunnymen's "Killing Moon".

## Primordial Undermind *Universe I've Got* CAMERA OBSCURA CAM032 CD

The logo of Australian label Camera Obscura is a fairly reliable trademark of quality stoner-psych. However, Primordial Undermind are closer to such booze/biker units as The Walking Seeds and Blue Oyster Cult than the likes of The Azusa Plane. A weighty rhythm section anchors this US five piece, leaving the guitars to flick and spin through the distinctly 1968 West Coast ballroom fug. Of course, passages of Camera Obscura's de rigueur infinite bleep and phase are also present, but they're executed in such an endearingly straightahead manner, it's almost moving. Great stuff.

## Jon Spencer *Blues Explosion meets Dub Narcotic Sound System Sideways* SOUL K KLP103 CD

New York groovers The Blues Explosion can sure dance good but boy, do their records suck. Their one-trick 'funky drummer meets rockabilly' riffage never comes close to delivering on Spencer's gibbering, ecstatic rock rhetoric or his exhortations against 'squaredom'. In this clash with Dub Narcotic (Jeff Smith on organ and Calvin Johnson of Beat Happening on vocals), Spencer threatens to kickstart his guitar for 40 minutes while Johnson deadpans the first inane phrase he can think of. How about walking it like you talk it next time, chumps?

## Violent Femmes *Viva Wisconsin* COOKING VINYL/COOKCD189 CD

Alongside Talking Heads, Violent Femmes successfully bottled and flogged the politely zany mindset of the average middlebrow rock consumer. Their workmanlike conception of bar-room jazz, all skipping brushes and itchy bass plucking, is particularly irritating in its endless enthusiasm. Coupled with Gordon Gano's limp, self-deprecating monologues, it's a fairly noxious brew. Their first live album *Viva Wisconsin* was recorded during a week long tour of their home turf, capturing for posterity the Femmes' all-time worst version of "Blister In The Sun". □

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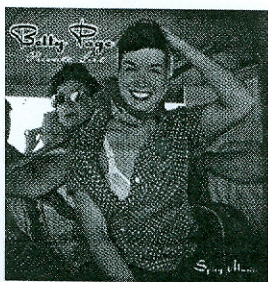
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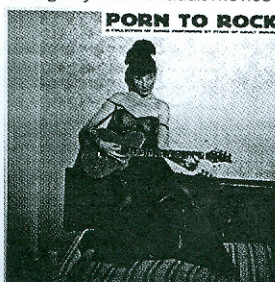
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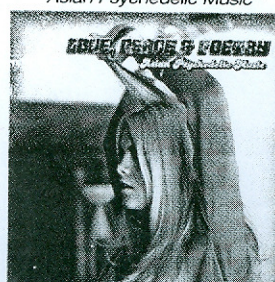
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