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December 1, 2004, by Bill Ribas

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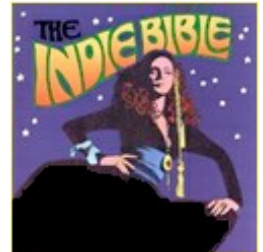
Brookfield, *Maybe This Time* (© 2004 Brookfield)

In music, there's a danger of becoming too generic, or having a disc produced so slick that nothing stands out. That appears to be the concern with this band. It's not their fault, I'd say, but rather the big marketing machines. As an example, when I hear the first song, "Dreams," I think of X games, soda commercials, and it becomes hard to listen to the music for the sake of the music. The band members – guitarist Adam Bilz, drummer Matt Bilz, singer Mikey Jerdan, and bassist Justin Steuer – are all capable musicians. And the CD is well produced. It's just nothing knocks me over, or establishes itself in my memory. There are, however, a few songs of note for various other reasons. One, "Cherry Dip," clocking in at just over two minutes, is sort of free-form noodling, basically filler, but it contains some nice ethereal guitar and bass work, and stands in marked contrast to the rest of the material. "Real Deal" is a heavy mover, starting off quietly with a repetitive bass riff, some winding guitar and vocals before crashing in big. Perhaps this song should have opened the disc. The closer, "Steubler," is also a filler cut, with some studio banter thrown in, before settling into a real nice acoustic groove. So the talent is there, just a little direction needed. www.brookfieldrecords.com.

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The April Skies, *The Breathe EP* (© 2003 Crawford/Higgins/Mazick/Tritico)

Maybe it's just the holiday season that has me feeling nostalgic, but the sound of this band definitely seems to harken back to the glory days of the '80s, in particular, bands like the Cure and Echo and the Bunnymen come to mind. Perhaps it's the emotion in the music, or the melodic appeal of the songs that makes this EP interesting – or maybe it's just the nice sound of a guitar running through a chorus pedal (and boy do I miss my old DOD unit), but this band from Pennsylvania does a bang-up job on the five songs here. The opener, and title cut by the way, combines an early REM sound with the darkness of Brit bands. There's a heavy bass pounding as the guitar raises and lowers the volume, while the keyboards build tension in the background. Singer/guitarist Jake Crawford has a voice that complements the music well, one with a pained and emotive feel to it, at times evincing a sound not unlike Bryan Ferry. The rhythm section of bassist Mark Mazick and drummer Mark Tritico creates a solid backdrop without overpowering the band. Similarly, Mark Higgins' keyboard work never comes heavily to the forefront, yet remains a significant element of the band's sound. www.theaprilskies.com



Niko, *LA Town Colors* (© 2004 Nick Poullos)

The cover sports a Bono-like fellow, holding his tinted shades with one hand while the other pushes his belted jeans down toward his crotch. The first song is "China Girl," but not the one you're thinking of, though it does show Bowie's influence. A little research proves our hero Niko to be more than just some guy with enough cash to make a disc. This is his second, actually, and I might add, he's a doctor who does research on genetic disorders. As if that's not enough, the liner photos have him standing next to Playboy Playmates. Oh, one more thing, he races Porsches. I'm sure there's more, but that's enough for me. As for the music, well, it does have a Bowie tinge to it – big, with shades of glam, but more Ian Hunter kind of sound. Niko's pipes work quite well, though he sounds a bit more like Jim Morrison than Bowie. He also assembled some big players for this disc, such as drummer Jimmy Hunter (Ray Manzarek, Steppenwolf), bassist Bob Birch (Elton John), and guitarist Paul Warren (Rod Stewart, Joe Cocker). The result is a disc that comes from the outside in a sense; with all the other stuff going on in his life, Niko can't possibly immerse himself in music 24-7, and admits in the liner that he can't really read or write music. It's that outsider approach that gives the disc a fresh sound, and allows it to stand apart from the mainstream. Check out the doc at www.cdbaby.com/cd/drniko2.

Big Leg Emma, *The Color of Wind* (© 2004 Big Leg Emma)

This band, which hails from Western New York, plays an amalgam of bluegrass, roots rock, folk, and myriad other flavors. Sure, they sound like a jam band at times, but their songs are more rigidly constructed than the devil-may-care approach of some jam bands.

And, yeah, everyone gets their solos in, but the approach has its roots more in bluegrass than space jams. That said, what comes out of the speakers is energetic, and quite lively. With a lineup that includes bass and drums, two guitars, fiddle and mandolin, not to mention quite a few vocalists, there is indeed a wide range of sounds to be heard. "Crazy Me" has a reggae feel to it at the intro, yet when the vocals come in, it shifts to sounding bluegrass. The song "Broken Sky," which opens the disc, has a free jam feel to it, with guitar work reminiscent of Jerry Garcia, though the chorus sounds like it could have emanated from a country station. The various styles interweave seamlessly, so that nothing jars the listener, and at the same time new frontiers are opened up. When you hear the song "So Long," for example, and in the background of the chorus there is a glockenspiel knocking out notes, it doesn't seem out of character. A refreshing disc. www.biglegemma.com

Steve Broderick, *Steve Broderick* (© 2004 Steve Broderick)

Broderick, who has been a vocalist with the Trans-Siberian Orchestra recently, strikes out with a solo effort (and I don't mean strikes out like the disc is a loser, rather that he ventures out on his own apart from the band). The sound is solid, with a classic blues-based approach to rock. And Broderick has some good help here – from producer/bassist Mike Lutz, who wrote "Smokin' in the Boy's Room" to guitarists Blue Miller (Bob Seger), Joel Hoekstra, and drummer Mark Ambrosino (Stevie Wonder, Michael McDonald). But it is Broderick's voice that holds court, a voice which displays a wide range of tones and emotions. On "You Don't Even Know," even with guitar lines working back and forth, his vocals still cut through. And on a ballad like "No Accident," Broderick shows a breathy side as the song begins, intoning softly as the chords descend. Yet he can also snarl like a junkyard dog, as on "Lovelight," a song that sounds like a rejuvenated Rolling Stones tune. Of the songs, there is just one cover, "Never A Day Goes By" by Artful Dodger, with the other dozen tunes penned by Broderick and his collaborators. Whether the song is a blasting rock number or a pensive ballad, it is Broderick's voice that holds it all together thematically. www.stevebroderick.com

Speak Easy, *Low Moral Character* (© Speak Easy)

The first thought that comes to mind when the disc spins is "slacker." Why? Well, as "Fuse & Melt" plows ahead, Kevin Verni's vocals are in the ballpark, but there are a lot of foul balls. So right off the bat, there's a lack of attention to detail, or maybe the off-key notes are what the band is looking for. Either way, at least for me, that's slacking off. But quiriness has a tendency to grow on me, and after a while, the near misses on the notes don't seem to matter as much. The music is a mix between jam band and metal, and again, the first song gives ample evidence. It starts off with just acoustic guitar, then vocals, but sooner or later a big fat metal guitar comes in to hammer away at some chords. It's an odd mix, but nevertheless one that works in a weird way. By the second song, a ska influence is detected, and

they remind me of the Dead Milkmen. The third number starts off like a rock opera, with some bass and guitar noodling, yet by midstream it sounds reminiscent of a '60s Brit tune. The band seems to be torn between a reggae/ska sound and the overpowering crunch of a metal guitar (think No Doubt, Sublime). At times they are successful, other times, ah, well, not so. See for yourself at www.speakeasymusic.net.

Thea K, *Species Closeout* (© 2004 TK Multimedia)

Holy Bono Batman, a rocker with a social conscience. As Thea Kearney sings on the title track, "Human expansion and greed, breeding like rabbits, can't just have two or three, Bear gall bladder, tiger aphrodisiac, as if we really needed help to breed," this ain't no boy-loves-girl rock and roll. And as each song passes, you might wish for a simple love song, but Kearney doesn't deliver that. Instead, you're peppered with lyrics that took a bit more than five minutes to hammer out, inundated with social commentary and observations. Granted, it's not the cheeriest stuff you'll ever hear, and it might even depress you. But I'd prefer to think of Kearney as a modern-day Patti Smith, a woman unafraid to punch out at problems she sees. Isn't rock and roll about rebellion anyway? The sound of the trio, consisting of Kearney on guitar and vocals, Peter Sampson on bass, and Pam Arnold on drums, has a stripped-down and bare-garage-band sound. Kind of like a beefed-up White Stripes with a bassist and female vocalist out front. "Thirty Dollars An Ounce," a song about the haves and have-nots, is my favorite. Check her out at www.theamusic.com.

Crease, *Only Human* (© 2004 Whateverman Records)

The boys from Florida are back – and with a vengeance. **When last we checked in with them**, they had just cut a record, and things were looking up. But real life ain't Hollywood, and just two weeks after the release, the guy that signed them was gone, and they parted with the record company. Instead of pumping gas and painting houses, they continued on, and now we have this release. I still think they don't know there are nine numbers on the amp dials below 10, because this disc has all the subtlety of a right cross from Mike Tyson. To be honest, there are dynamics in spots, where the music comes down for a nice effect, but at times it's like looking for Waldo. Simply put, if these guys were any more energetic, they'd explode. More melodic than the current crop of speed punk and rock bands out there, their music is satisfying because it has hooks. You might feel like you're getting beat up while you listen, but the hooks stay in your head. And even a song that starts off slowly, such as "Indifferent," is a ballad in disguise. Sure, it's calm, the drums are buried a bit in the mix for effect, but then, about one minute in, things get louder, and 30 seconds later, bam. If you take your coffee black, and your whiskey straight, fire up Crease and rock on. www.crease.org

John Amen, *All I'll Ever Need* (© 2004 John Amen/ Electric Bacon Songs)

Amen may have a voice that's pitched on the high side, like Paul Simon, but for some reason he reminds me of Dylan or Woody Guthrie. His songs have that written-while-traveling-across-America feel to them, and with subtle, minimal instrumentation, their delivery is direct and unflinching. On "New Year's Song," Amen's voice has a light rasp to it, as he sings, "Call me baby, when you get home, because I can't wait to hear that phone ring, I've been dreaming of you, on this New Year's Eve, far away." As the song plays on, both mandolin and fiddle weave back and forth, while brushes on drums keep steady time. In a break, there's some harmonica, and, well, you get the picture. Amen loses me on "Waiting For Mary," where if there were any more reverb on his voice, he'd be swallowed up in a black hole of effects. Minor gaffs aside, this is a comforting disc of music on the folk side. Amen does get loud on a number or two, but for the most part, all you need do is sit back, relax, and let him serenade you. www.johnamen.com

Ju Jitsu, *Ju Jitsu* (© Ju Jitsu)

This must be a teaser for an upcoming album, as there are only three songs, no copyright info, no jewel case, nothing that would make you think full-blown disc. The music, however, is quite full blown, a mix of heavy metal and hardcore. The sound is straight ahead and in your face. On "The Ringers," there are moments of calm before the trio explodes into angry chord changes and aggressive vocals. The second number, "Paul," funkily gets underway, with some speedy picking and multiple drum kicks, and oh yeah, some heavy vocals as well. "Hermit," a song that lyrically takes a more philosophical approach and begins much more calmly than the other numbers, sooner or later explodes as well. There is an interesting mix between the calm and the aggressive here, although I don't think three songs are enough to make adequate judgment. Hop on over to www.jujitsurocks.com and maybe you can find out more.

Queen Esther, *Talkin' Fishbone Blues* (© 2004 EL Recordings)

Who is Queen Esther? Who does she sound like? At first, she reminded me a bit of Bonnie Raitt, until near the end of the opening track, when she just cuts loose like nobody's business. The cover photo shows her in profile, delivering a sense of seriousness and pride. Then the press notes indicate she is classically trained, and in possession of a four-octave range. So what's she singing swampy rock and blues for? The short answer is who cares, because she kills on the material here. Further scanning of the press reveals she was a guest vocalist on James "Blood" Ulmer's "No Escape From the Blues." And if you're familiar with Ulmer's work, that should impress you; if not, nod your head in reverence anyway and go do some research. The title track leans more toward rock and roll with a heavy blues undercurrent, like our old pals the Rolling Stones. Yet on a moderately paced song like "Love," her voice dances lightly delivering the lyrics, while in the background a guitar plays some

sweet blues lines. "New York City" starts out with a funky run, chaotic right out of the box, highlighted by some intoxicating slide guitar work. So do you classify this as blues, or rock, or what? About the only word I can think of is "smoking," because this disc is from start to finish. www.queen-esther.com

Shane Scott, *Gingerbread House* (© 2004 PlayRoom Records, Inc.)

The picture on the cover shows Scott leaning against a doorway, nothing special, and nothing that would indicate the type of music you might hear inside. The title and the copyright info lead me into thinking this might be some sort of kiddie disc. Yet I was not prepared for what came out of the speakers. The sound is that of a highly polished pop disc, kind of a male Britney Spears. And though I can't say if Scott can dance like Spears (heavy of foot and navel showing), his voice does not seem to fit the picture (appearances are always deceiving lately), but it is fresh sounding and not without appeal. Scott apparently took his time in the studio and learned all the production tricks himself, a process that takes a lot of time and effort (if you've never worked in a studio, take my word for it). The payoff is the disc, which is produced quite well, and for that Scott should be proud. The songs are good, in a radio-friendly non-threatening kind of way, and sound as if they could have been done by the multiple boy bands (Backstreet Boys, N'Sync, etc.), though here it is just Scott tackling the chores. As a singer/songwriter/producer, the lad seems to be ahead of the game, and talented. My guess is the big time ain't too far off. www.shanescott.com

Massimo, *Massimo* (© 2004 Michael Massimo/Skytide Music)

There's some stuff that recently happened to Michael Massimo that might have caused him to quit, namely setting his car on fire while he was sleeping in it, having his guitars stolen, and losing his father. A trinity of events like that would probably send me to binge town, but Massimo stuck to his guns and kept doing what he knows best, and that is singing. His voice is bold, though on the first cut I sensed some wavering (which could be attributed to this cold room I am in), but that's nitpicking. On "Accident," he belts it out, fighting with the guitars to be heard, and winning. "Wasted" is a calmer song, well, calmer for longer sections at least, as the band does get loud, and again Massimo's pipes are powerful and clear. If there is a knock to be laid against him, it's more on the songwriting end of things. He's got the voice, sure, and that's apparent from the numbers here. But if you're looking for hooks, or a melodic appeal, you won't find it on these five songs. Instead, you're met with more of a metal approach to vocals and lyrics, where hanging around the root and fifth are prevalent, lending a dark overall tone. www.massimomusic.net

Mare Edstrom, *Inside the Blues* (© Mare Edstrom)

If you're a woman and sing the blues, you might have a tougher time

proving yourself than, say, any guy with a guitar that can play a turnaround. I don't make the rules, just an observation. But success shouldn't be a problem for Edstrom, who can belt out the classics with the best of them. And surprise, on this disc, that's just what she does. You'll hear songs out of the blues canon, like "Statesboro Blues," "The Thrill Is Gone," and "Can't Be Satisfied," to name a few. Edstrom's voice isn't the whiskey-soaked growl of a Joplin, though it does find an edge from time to time. Instead, she seems to just belt it out with a cleanness and very little distortion. Backing her up are some fine players, like Kenn Fox on guitar and bass, Steve Cohen on harmonica, Randy Green on the Hammond organ, and Randy Mueller on drums. Together they provide a powerful backdrop for Edstrom, with some real nice guitar and harp work. Edstrom's take on "The Thrill Is Gone" is worth noting, as she turns it into a slow driving number, with an open central section. An interesting take on the classics. www.spiritonerecords.com

Lyza Wilson, *Lyza Wilson* (© Lyza Wilson)

Finally this month we have Lyza Wilson, with a peppy voice, sounding somewhat like a caffeinated Natalie Merchant. And that's not a knock; the latter has a tendency to sound a bit reticent in her recordings, while Wilson's voice has a similar timbre, but a lot bolder. The music has an industrial pop sound to it, almost machine like. On "Anonymous," for example, the pedaling of guitar notes on the verse gives way to big crashing chords (though the notes come back), and the whole song swells. For some reason it reminded me of Cher's "If I Could Turn Back Time," which might give you an idea of the song's feel. "All She Wants" is the sixth cut on the disc, and with its bluesy style, it breaks the string of pop songs that preceded it (and tended to blend together), providing a welcome relief. That's not to say that the first five cuts are bad, just needed a breather. "Suffer" is a slow-paced number, a cool song that might remind you of a James Bond soundtrack as it drifts by. By the end of the disc, you realize that Wilson has an impressive voice, the band is tight, and, well, dang it, she should be on the airwaves. www.lyzawilson.com

Email columnist Bill Ribas

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