

Songs on Thompson's 'Amnesia' hard to forget

By Rick Heyman
Emerald Contributor

Richard Thompson — Amnesia

Despite being one of the finest guitarists alive, Richard Thompson is surprisingly little-known. Most rock "guitar heroes" gain attention through flash or speed. Thompson, however, has taste and style — qualities that put him in very exclusive company. His peers are not Malmsteen and Van Halen but Knopfler and Clapton.

Amnesia's songs alternate between the brooding and the venomous, and the guitar solos

Record Reviews

fit the songs' moods brilliantly, shifting from melancholy to stinging. Mitchell Froom's (Crowded House, Del Fuegos) production is stellar, from the rock-solid studio pros used to the arrangements to the exotic (northumbrian pipes and brass quartets on a rock album!) instrumentation that adds exquisite color without detracting from the mood of the tracks.

Although Thompson's latest recordings have lacked the emotional electricity that marked his last record with his wife (1982's universally acclaimed *Shoot Out the Lights*), and his first major label solo album after their split (1985's bitter but masterful *Across a Crowded Room*), *Amnesia* is a solid, engaging record.

Big Country — Peace in Our Time

If you've heard the first sin-

gle off of this record, "King of Emotion," your first reaction may have been similar to mine: "Has it really come to this?" The song kicks off with awful coliseum-rock power chording and climaxes (implodes?) with the inane chorus. Is this really the band that rose to fame in the shadow of U2, sharing U2's producer and their orientation toward big guitars and big messages?

Well, the initial shock and suspicion of sell-out dissipates quickly. "King of Emotion" (which, incidentally, isn't so bad after you've heard it a few times) is an obvious concession to tight radio playlists, but the rest of the record is pure Big Country. The guitar/e-bow signature sound is intact, the lyrics are just as poetic and overarching as ever (try song titles like "From Here to Eternity," "Peace in Our Time," and "River of Hope" on for size), plus a now appropriately big drum sound.

Neither the writing nor the arrangements have evidenced much growth (save the endearing electric jig that concludes the album), but ten fiery Big Country cuts and one so-so radio song make *Peace in Our Time* a worthy successor to *The Crossing*.

Michelle Shocked — Short Sharp Shocked

Unlike the almost immediate appeal of other recent, exceptional debut albums by women — Sinead O'Connor, Tracy Chapman, and Toni Childs — Michelle Shocked's first studio LP takes awhile to reveal its charms. It's clear she's not yet in the league of the other three,

but it's also clear she has a lot of potential.

Short Sharp Shocked has a couple pleasant if tepid folk songs toward the beginning. By the fourth track, however, she's all business — ranging from funny to poignant to outraged to insightful. Producer Pete Anderson seems to be the crucial ingredient in this venture — Shocked shines only when the instrumentation gives her a background that complements her message.

Short Sharp Shocked showcases a musician with a short-story writer's knack for setting and character. She's charming and witty. She's outspoken. And once she hones her ear for melody and matures out of an over-reliance on folk-talky tunes that don't really draw in the listener, she'll really be someone to reckon with.

Bruce Springsteen — Chimes of Freedom (Live EP)

This twenty-minute EP (which, by the way, is also available in the new three-inch CD format) is a treasure. Recorded on the *Tunnel of Love* tour, with proceeds going to Amnesty International, it mixes the new and the old. "Tougher Than the Rest" is performed pretty straight, as is the rarity "Be True" (a great B-side from *The River* sessions). Bob Dylan's "Chimes of Freedom" is given a big, *Born to Run*-era wall-of-sound (complete with glockenspiel), while Bruce breathes new life into "Born to Run" by downscaling it from an full-band anthem to a solo, acoustic plea for personal freedom and survival.

I doubt my two-cents on Bruce will sway anyone — you either love him or despise him at this point. The faithful will

cherish this little "State of The Boss, 1988" souvenir and the rest, well, at least it's not getting over-hyped.

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