

"We want to have the records and bands [be] as visible as possible, but remain underground," says Owen. "I don't want to go to the Warped Tour and see Jade Tree T-shirts as visible as Korn T-shirts. The motivation has always been to have respect and credibility...that's what punk rock's about."

It's also about not being perceived as a sellout—something that matters to Walters and Owen. "I definitely think there are times when they are far too concerned with what the vocal minority is saying about them—the really punk-rock kids who can't stand to let something [succeed]," says Promise Ring guitarist Jason Gnewikow. Still, he notes, "they've continued to grow with us, which I think has kept us together."

Despite jitters about becoming too big for their own good, there's no question Owen and Walters are looking to the long term. Their commerce-and-commentary website (with its increasingly active message boards) is as professional as that of a major. They recently moved the label into an office building in Newark, Del., and hired additional help—quite a leap for two guys who, just a year ago, were spending their evenings and weekends filling mail-order requests from their bedrooms. They've actually been able to make a living off of what Owen says began as a hobby: The Promise Ring's *Very Emergency* and Jets to Brazil's *Orange Rhyming Dictionary* have moved nearly 50,000 albums each.

As for Morrissey? Well, The Promise Ring *did* manage to secure a recent gig opening for the King of Pop. "We were instructed, 'Don't look at him, don't talk to him, as soon as you're done, everything has to be cleared up,'" says Gnewikow. "There was a big barrier between us." Sounds as if the singer isn't ready for such indie-sent exposure. ●●●



IMPURITY
IN PINK
No Doubt

FORWARD SPIN NEW upcoming releases

NO DOUBT

Return of Saturn [*Trauma/Interscope*] Someone finally Heimlich maneuvered most of that squeak toy from Gwen Stefani's throat. As she sings about boyfriend trauma, you wonder whom she's talking about: Tony the bass player? Gavin from Bush? This album plays like a *Behind the Music* episode, complete with a fun soundtrack of peppy new-wave songs, punky dirges, and too many blah-blah ballads, but it's not nearly as addictive. B- —Michele Romero

SLEATER-KINNEY

All Hands on the Bad One [*Kill Rock Stars*] Don't let those gentle strings on the opening "Ballad of a Ladyman" fool you: Washington's fiercest three-piece haven't gone soft. But the group's fifth album does find them smoothing their punk edge with

pop polish: Witness the high-speed anthem "Youth Decay" and the party-ready shout-along "You're No Rock n' Roll Fun." A- —BMR

COMMON

Like Water for Chocolate [*MCA*] Common's sparse arrangements may allow for plenty of room for his sharp rhyming skills, but they also grow dull quickly. Despite the occasional well-oiled groove (like the rollicking piano of "The 6th Sense") and guest spots by Mos Def and D'Angelo, *Water* never emerges from its monotony-induced dry spell. C+ —BMR

SPRING HEEL JACK

Treader [*Thirsty Ear*] Whether warping "My Favourite Things" or sculpting their own subversive soundscapes, this electronica duo creates atmospheres so visceral and warm

it's hard to imagine them springing from a computer. There's not a soulless second here, just jazzy horns, serpentine beats, and symphonic squall. If extreme daydreaming ever becomes a real sport, here's the soundtrack. A- —Laura Morgan

SONIC YOUTH

NYC Ghosts and Flowers [*Geffen/Interscope*] Sonic Youth's new disc is so evocative of Manhattan life that you'll feel like you've licked the floor of a yellow cab. It's yet another of the band's compelling avant-trash-punk epics, built on gritty cacophony, vaporous melodies, and ominous poetry. If you appreciate the seedier side of the city, this is one cool tour. B+ —LM

SUPERGRASS

Supergrass [*Island/Def Jam*] If Ben Folds Five weren't such forlorn

wusses they might have recorded a pop blast like "Moving," which jump-starts this British act's third album. But will U.S. airwaves embrace this band? Don't count on it. Supergrass' triumphant songs (recalling Bowie, the Beach Boys, and the Beatles) rely on a smart tunefulness that's out of step with rock's current meat-head bent. B+ —LM

TRAVIS

The Man Who [*Epic*] Finally, a rock album fueled more by tears than beers. This Glaswegian foursome is blessed with Fran Healy, a frontman whose alluring tenor wanders with melancholic vulnerability for lonely stretches, then bursts into immense euphoria. Nearly each track has the band punching life back into Healy before he flat-lines, leading to some truly breathtaking music. A —MR