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Tyler Wintermute Emerald

Authority Zero releases catchy 'suburban McPunk'

Ken Paulman
Freelance Reporter

"A Passage in Time," Authority Zero, Lava Records

Authority Zero's press release says it all: "If you ever eat cereal for dinner, like to break stuff, or use the word extreme to describe any of your hobbies, this band is for you!" In other words, those of you who are not Mountain Dew-guzzling teenagers may want to pass on this one.

In general, there's nothing on "A Passage in Time" that you haven't already heard before. Most tracks sound like either Green Day playing Metallica or Metallica playing Green Day, the others sound like 311 playing Sublime or vice-versa. Like all too many punk bands nowadays, Authority Zero play their power chords quickly and adeptly, but lack the expressiveness and social commentary of those that defined the genre, and it all comes across as gratuitous homage to groups like Bad Religion and Minor Threat.

But what Authority Zero lack in originality, they make up for with energy and ambition, and as far as suburban McPunk goes, you can certainly do much worse. The Mesa, Ariz. band started back in 1994, and eight years of relentless practice and performing have gone into this, their first full-length album. Cliché ridden as it is, "A Passage in Time" is a solid piece of work, and should be a big hit with the all-ages crowd.

More importantly, Authority Zero have managed to parlay this cookie-cutter sound into a considerable following in Phoenix, which means they must put on one heck of a live show.

"Knock Knock Knock" (EP), Hot Hot Heat, Sub Pop Records

Hot Hot Heat are sick of being

compared to The Cure, which is a good thing. It would be unfortunate for this band to get sucked into the void of '80s New Wave nostalgia that should be inundating us any minute now.

"Knock Knock Knock" showcases a band struggling to define its sound. Hot Hot Heat started out playing dissonant noise rock on synthesizers and have recently undergone a transition into a more melodic, palatable sound. There is a thread of continuity to be found, a singular uniqueness that doesn't need to be propped up by U2-inspired drum riffs or Robert Smith-like vocal contortions from singer Steve Bays.

"Touch You Touch You," a richly complex tapestry of melody and emotion accented with mercifully restrained synthesizer trickery, is perhaps the most promising exhibition of what's (hopefully) to come.

Hot Hot Heat's forthcoming album "Make up the Breakdown" (scheduled for release Tuesday) will be the test of whether the band succumbs to the pop culture trendiness that brought us flash-in-the-pan hipsters like Make Up and The Strokes, or continues to define their own unique sound. I, for one, will be rooting for the latter.

"Multi Kontra Cult vs. Irony," Gogol Bordello, Rubric Records

I still struggle to come up with the words to describe Gogol Bordello. Perhaps it's best to use founder and frontman Eugene Hütz's term, "Ukrainian Gypsy Punk Cabaret," and leave it at that. Or, as Ben Sisario of the New York Times wrote: "Iggy Pop meets Kafka."

Hütz's songwriting combines surrealism, Ukrainian folklore and his own experiences as an immigrant. The tales are told with intensity and

dark humor, but also with the earnestness and boyish charm of Yakov Smirnoff on a bender.

A migration from his hometown of Kiev through refugee camps in Poland, Hungary, Austria and Italy introduced Hütz to Gypsy folk music, which he has synthesized with punk rock to create Gogol Bordello's unique sound. Imagine the soundtrack to a Soviet Muppet show composed by Joe Strummer.

The band's primary instruments are guitar, accordion, violin, saxophone and drums, and live shows are sometimes augmented by a brass section, dancers and circus performers, resulting in something more reminiscent of performance art than a rock show. According to the New York Daily News, Gogol Bordello has developed a reputation for leaving behind a trail of smashed tables and broken glass in its wake.

With that in mind, it seems futile to attempt to distill Gogol Bordello's theatrical frenzy into a recording that only speaks to one sense, but "Multi Kontra Cult vs. Irony" does the job as well as one can expect. The music is vibrant, vulgar and rich with color, driven by a relentless klezmer beat.

Hütz's rantings drift from English to Russian and back again before culminating in a foot-stomping, pint-hoisting chorus. As unpredictable as they are unique, Gogol Bordello descend from the wailing sadness of a Gypsy violin into vaudeville silliness in the blink of an eye.

"Multi Kontra Cult vs. Irony" is an album that truly defies categorization, a vanguard recording in a genre that has yet to be defined. And if you want to check out Gogol Bordello in person, they will be playing at Dante's in Portland Sunday.

Ken Paulman is a freelance writer. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.

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