

Two artists debut with DiFranco label

Andrew Bird and Hamell on Trial put out quality albums on Ani DiFranco's 'righteous' record label

By Aaron Shakra
Pulse Editor

Those with at least a modicum of knowledge of the folk music scene will probably equate the words "righteous babe" with Ani DiFranco. However, Righteous Babe is also the name of a record label, and not one that merely serves as an outlet for DiFranco's releases (her next one's due on Jan. 20, by the way).

Andrew Bird's "Weather Systems" and Hamell on Trial's "Tough Love" are two recent albums put out by Righteous Babe Records, and both provide

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a great representation of the quality artistry the label has to offer.

Ed Hamell is his full name, and while publicity materials describe his act as a "one man punk band," a more fitting genre for "Tough Love" might be folk-rock. Here is a well-rounded record about love, patriotism and materialism.

Yet throughout this dense set of topics, Hamell never loses his sense of humor, whimsy or playfulness. His writing style tends toward narrative short songs — the longest of the album's 16 tracks is the opener, "Don't Kill," which clocks in at about 3.5 minutes.

As the album progresses, Hamell's vocals, at first quite jarring, eventually reveal themselves as subtle and diverse. The lyrics are always distinct, and frequently hilariously blatant. "Halfway," the second track on the album, has a refrain of "I mean, fuck it, why go halfway?" to verses such as, "You're a world leader with your finger on the button / thinking that history is smiling on you. / Blow the shit out of everybody that doesn't agree. / Do it in the name of patriotism, what else should you do?"

DiFranco is a frequent collaborator on the recording, contributing her production talents, vocals and guitar. Longtime DiFranco producer Andrew "Goat" Gilchrist also co-produces many of the tracks.

An easy highlight of the album is a duet between Hamell and DiFranco called "All That Was Said," which is sung in the voices of a "girl" and a "guy" likely involved in a relationship. He says: "You didn't say / I didn't know." She responds: "All that was said

/ you didn't hear." Is this not a central tenant of most relationship difficulties?

While Andrew Bird's "Weather Systems" is his Righteous Babe Records debut, it's actually his sixth release overall. The mood of "Weather Systems" reflects a wintery, melancholy state of being. The songs are tinged with loneliness, but refreshingly, in the context of celebration and empowerment. The track "I," consists of three lines that say, "We're keeping busy yeah we're bleeding stones / with our machinations and our palindromes / anything but hear a voice that says we're basically alone." Later, the song "Lull" says: "Being alone it can be quite romantic / like Jacques Cousteau underneath the Atlantic / a fantastic voyage to parts unknown / going to depths where the sun's never shone / and I fascinate myself when I'm alone."

The music is heavily oriented toward Bird's unique violin playing, but plucking technique should not go without mention. Even though he is outnumbered two to one by guitarists, Bird lays the strings on thick. Nora O'Connor, one of the guitarists, also collaborates with Bird on vocals. The other is Mark Nevers, who is credited with "space guitar" in the liner notes. Kevin O'Donnell rounds out the four-piece band and is credited as playing the

drums and "etc."

An eight-minute documentary film about Bird, his life and band members is also included on "Weather Systems." It requires a computer and QuickTime 6.0 software. Bird plays at the Aladdin Theater in Portland tonight.

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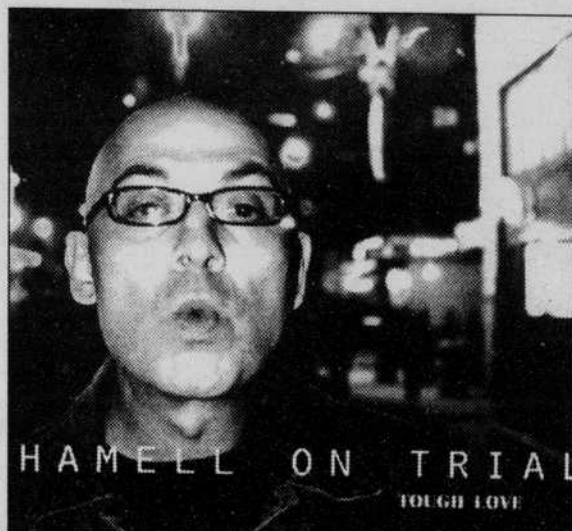
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Jet's debut album reminiscent of past rock 'n' roll successes

A little bit AC/DC, a little bit The Beatles, 'Get Born' mixes old-school sounds for a successful debut

By Steven Neuman
Freelance Reporter

If I could choose to see any two concerts in all of history, I would go see The Beatles play Shea Stadium in 1964 and the Rolling Stones play Hyde Park in 1969.

Combine the era-specific sounds of those two bands, add a splash of AC/DC, culturally ferment for 30 years and you would have pure distilled

rock 'n' roll moonshine. You would also have Jet, the latest band to crash into the mainstream.

The Australian band's debut release "Get Born" has garnered some high-profile attention. A featured spot in a nationally broadcast Apple iPod commercial with their single "Are You Gonna Be My Girl" has left feet tapping (mine included) across the nation. There's a sense of familiarity with the song that makes you wonder where you've heard it before, but this warm feeling of recognition is a sign of Jet's brilliance and stunning unoriginality.



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Since emergence of bands like The Strokes, record companies have scrambled to tap into that cultural phenomenon that is best described as a form of retro nostalgia, and Jet seems to fit the mold a bit too perfectly.

"Get Born" is a bit of a fraud, like the Abercrombie and Fitch "vintage" T-shirt or the Hot Topic trucker's hat. What looks authentic and feels authentic isn't always true. The whole album seems cool in a vaguely calculated way: The lo-fidelity style, the bits of studio chatter, and the apparent lack of production values are charming in this post-rock 'n' roll era, but it also leaves a bad aftertaste for this critic, who is reminded of Donny Osmond singing "I'm a little bit rock 'n' roll."

Songs like the hand-clap laden "Take It or Leave It" and the bluesy "Move On" seemed ripped from some lost Rolling Stones recording

session and the dead on Jagger-like vocals of brothers Chris and Nic Cester don't help much. "Cold Hard Bitch" is a song that rests squarely on a massive instrumental guitar chords with a beat and sound that screams "Back in Black." Similarly, the high-octane "Rollover D.J." is like the bastard child of Kiss and Iggy Pop.

On the whole, Jet's music is deliciously fun to listen to and comes across as a blend of anthem/arena rock and melancholy Paul McCartney-like soul-searching piano ballads. The problem I keep facing is that the band's influences are so blatant that it's hard to suppress comparisons. "Look What You've Done" sounds so much like "Hey Jude" that I found myself checking the liner notes to make sure the band wasn't covering some obscure song from a McCartney side project.

Despite Jet's flagrant retread of the great bands of the 1960s, I can't complain. The songs are adequate, if not good, and you can buy this record without fear of this being an album with only one good track. Hopefully, Jet will continue to explore their obvious musical talent and avoid the path of Oasis. That band learned the hard way; while musical roots run deep, the fans ultimately want change. Now, if only we could get the Rolling Stones to sound like this.

Steven Neuman is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.

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