

2003 had plenty of standout CDs

Whether it's because of a sorrowful moan, a bowel-shaking scream, or perfectly syncopated hand claps, there are moments in music when the frequency of the sound waves creates a certain energy. What's created is the exact energy required for sound particles to enter the ear canal, vibrate off the eardrum, and send the noise straight to the heart, tickling the back of the throat, before finally being pumped through the aorta.



Helen Schumacher

Notes from the underground

On that note, here is a recap of some of the albums from 2003 that possessed those moments.

Last year, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs came dangerously close to being over-hyped. Singer Karen O's ripped fishnet stockings had the band receiving pages of press long before they had even released their full-length debut, "Fever To Tell." However, the band was still able to impress audiences with the album, one of the most energetic releases of the year.

Karen O, along with guitarist Nick Zinner and drummer Brian Chase, made a beer-stained album that's equal parts glamour, sleaze and guitar lick. The best songs on the album are the last three: "Maps," "Y Control" and "Modern Romance." These songs have an intimacy that differs from the rest of the charged dance numbers on the album.

Another new band to make a name for itself this year was Broken Social Scene. The Toronto-based collective's album "You Forgot It In People" begins far away with a distant, airy drone, but doesn't quite reach its destination until the galloping percussion of the second song, "KC Accidental." This draws the listener toward something more elusive with each swell of music. By the third track, you're unself-consciously clapping your hands and shaking your head. On the song "Anthems For A Seventeen Year-Old Girl," Emily Haines' vocals, although hushed and childlike,

sound sinister as she repeats the lines "Park that car, drip that phone, sleep on the floor, dream about me" over violin and banjo instrumentation. Although "You Forgot It In People" is overall an outstanding album, there are a couple of tracks where it's hard not to feel embarrassed for the band.

This past year, two seasoned folksters released noteworthy albums. Bonnie "Prince" Billy came out with "Master and Everyone," a recording that almost sounds like an Appalachian lullaby. Although "Master and Everyone" comes up short when compared to some of Billy's previous work, it remains a beautiful album — a sparse meandering through a backwoods of comforting timelessness.

Similarly, last year's "You Are Free" by Cat Power is a great album, but not their masterpiece. From her twisting and contorting lips behind a curtain of thick bangs, band leader Chan Marshall's voice manages to produce goose bumps. However, there are moments that are lost to a more radio-friendly, straightforward singing style and slick production. As a musician, Marshall's greatest asset is her aching warble, which sounds best on the track "Good Woman," a breathtaking song that perfectly fuses all the best elements of "You Are Free" into one melody.

Rounding out the list is The Shins' graceful second album, "Chutes Too Narrow." It's nearly impossible to separate the perfectly blended parts and describe them. This proves just how talented the band is.

All of the aforementioned albums have a way of inducing a psychosomatic effect on me. But The Shins' release produces the most dramatic response. In the song "Mine's Not a High Horse," the way lead singer James Mercer's voice drops and sings "You want them all on your side/ that just makes more for doubt to slaughter," makes the space around my eyes well up. As Mercer quietly sings "But your memory is here and I'd like it to stay warm light on a winter day" in the song "Pink Bullets," a feeling of nostalgia churns my stomach. The tracks "Kissing the Lipless" and "So Says I" make my heart strings shiver with delight.

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Fitehouse promotes music using ingenuity, not industry

Using creative marketing and 'open source music,' the band aims to resist major industry conventions

By Ryan Nyburg
Senior Pulse Reporter

For some bands, promotional material is a way to sell albums. For the Baltimore-based band Fitehouse, the promotions are part of the message. Performing a number of self-styled "media blitzes," the band has attempted to get its music out to the general populace without the assistance of the music industry. With the release of their "The Bomb EP," the band has taken things a step further.

The songs are not only free to download, they are also free to sample, remix and build upon. Called "open source music," the idea is that the music, right down to the individual instrumental and vocal tracks, is free for others to use and even to sell.

All the lyrics, chords and recorded works are available on the band's Web site, www.fitehouse.com, and the band even invites people to send

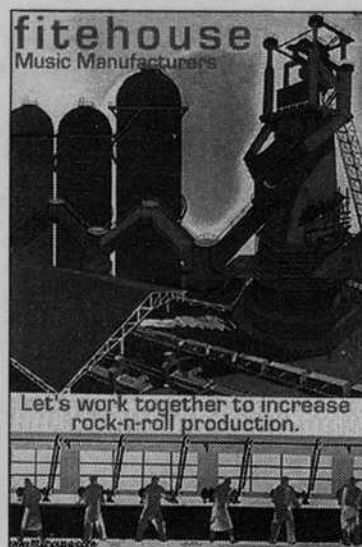
in remixes to post on their site.

CD REVIEW

As a band, Fitehouse is an odd assembly. Founded by guitarist Josh Cohen and vocalist Gabe Gilligan — who formed the band after "doing the corporate thing" for a number of years — the band also includes bassist Edward Plant and drummer Eduardo Ceceña. Plant is a jazz/fusion veteran, while Ceceña, the band's third drummer since its formation, previously played in a funk band in Mexico.

Combining a mix of publicity stunts, accessible music and marketing experience, the band decided to take a route outside the music industry after some poor experiences with radio and recording outlets.

"Even when I was in college, if you had some music and wanted to get it on the air it wasn't too hard to take it down to the local radio station and have some friends call up and request



Courtesy

it," Cohen said. "If it was a local enough show you could get airtime. Then we had the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which allowed a lot of consolidation in radio and that really changed things."

Further consolidation of the radio industry, particularly through companies such as Clear Channel Communications — which owns more than 1,300 radio stations nationwide according to the company's Web site — meant less focus on local music and more on nationally popular acts, Cohen said.

"We had a fairly good-sized following, but we just couldn't get airtime," Cohen said. "We sent CDs and stuff to local radio and realized we didn't know who we were sending it to and who could make the decisions. We were trying to figure out how to crack that nut and we decided we had to be creative about it."

Through such creative acts, Fitehouse acts less like a band and more like an example to other bands.

"We started to think of ourselves as more than just a band, though I know that sounds like a cliché," Gilligan said. "But we started thinking that maybe we can bring our other influences into the mix, such as marketing, rather than just playing bars all the time."

Fitehouse has been adept at self-marketing since the beginning. One of the band's original projects was the creation of an official rock anthem for

the city of Baltimore, leading to a song named after the city that was inspired by "a night of drinking beer and listening to Journey," Cohen said. While the song got little airplay and only a lukewarm endorsement from Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley, it did get the band rolling on some other projects.

One of these projects is an ongoing campaign against the Recording Industry Association of America, particularly the RIAA's fight against music file sharing. Through a series of seriocomic postcards mailed out to a variety of media outlets, the band promoted themselves while simultaneously attacking the RIAA's practice of filing lawsuits against file sharers. Cohen also self-published his own manifesto against the recording and radio industry entitled "Common Musical Sense," and the comparisons to Thomas Paine's famous pre-Revolutionary War tract "Common Sense" are not accidental.

"I find great inspiration in the colonial period," Cohen said. "Then the issue was not necessarily being part of England, but England dictating to us without sufficient representation of our citizens. I see an analogy in our cultural life, with really only five large record companies that dictate our cultural options and tell us how we're going to get it and how we're going to pay for it."

Fitehouse's efforts are starting to attract the attention of others involved in the fight over large record company dominance. Among these is the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a legal organization that has been providing defense for people sued by the RIAA for file sharing.

"I think they have an inspiring approach," EFF Senior Staff Attorney Fred von Lohmann said. "What they recognize is that for bands that aren't well known, the record labels don't offer many options. They're finding a new way to be noticed."

The band hopes that others will take up the example they are trying to set, that musicians can make music outside the regular music industry. Or, as Gilligan said, "If we can do this, you can do this as well."

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