

CD releases fall short of avoiding derivative quality

Artists including former Eugenean David Jacobs-Strain harness their genres

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Rock 'n' roll is so rarely original that often the music praised during the year is merely derivative retreads of ideas put forward years before. What we often end up with are reminders of better times rather than rally calls for better futures. It all boils down to the same five or six ideas repeated ad nauseum until something breaks and a new sound is created. We might be heading toward a breaking point soon, if this collection of new albums is any indication of what passes for modern musical flavor.

First up is the latest from the Silos, "When the Telephone Rings." Oh, Tom Petty, what horrors you have wrought. This band sounds like nothing better than a retread of a retread, pedestrian rock music without a

single original idea. It's a light rock affair in the style of Joe Walsh, Bruce Springsteen and other horrors of the 1980s. These guys want to be the Eagles so badly it's almost palpable.

The music is unoriginal and the lyrics are bland. Senseless and unqualified lines such as "Keep your heart innocent of this world" abound, as the band unleashes a message of hope and trust that would be all fine and dandy if it didn't make me want to vomit so profusely. None of it is ever well-written enough to be meaningful, and if songwriter Walter Salas-Humara had been able to squeeze out even an ounce of eloquence, instead of simply reciting what could be discarded bumper sticker logos, this whole affair might have been worthwhile. But what the hell, it probably sounds a whole lot better to a drunken audience than it does to music snobs such as myself.

Something you don't have to be inebriated to enjoy is the latest from songwriter/guitarist David Jacobs-Strain (all right! A local boy!). The former Eugenean's new album, "Ocean or a Teardrop," is a decent collection of

modern blues and blues-rock tunes, featuring a few more decent licks than some of the material deserves. Jacobs-Strain is a superb acoustic-guitar player and an interesting vocalist, his voice reaching into registers much lower than his youth would lead you to believe were possible.

The problem with the album is a simple unevenness in the quality of the songwriting. Some of the songs just don't cut it compared to the highlights. It isn't just a matter of Jacobs-Strain's abilities as a songwriter; some of the original material is fantastic, while some of the covers plod on without purpose. Strain's guitar work is also often buried by the overbearing backing band, as drums, guitars and mandolins are laid over songs that don't require much in the way of extravagance. Simpler instrumentation and a more refined songwriting sense could have produced a masterwork, but what we have instead is worthwhile for the highlights nonetheless.

Still uneven, but not so much so, is the latest from the Pleasure Club, entitled "The Fugitive Kind." The

album is an amalgamate of post-punk influences mixed with Lou Reed-style subject matter, all junkies and hookers. Kicking off with the anthemic "Hey! Hey! Hey!", the album sets itself up right in the middle of the current dance-oriented rock trend, with all the rap and disco bass lines and catchy-as-hell choruses that the sub-genera entails. But the band is a little more eclectic than that, mixing a wide range of rock into the mix, including My Bloody Valentine-style guitars and a few tracks that are pure indie pop gems.

The album's problem is less with the material than with the weak production. The music has no bottom and nothing really rumbles or growls the way it wants to. Lead singer James Hall's voice sounds like it's straining against a weak public-announcement system. This problem becomes evident through the album's stand-out track, the scary-ass funk of "Crooks," a song recorded at an earlier date than the rest of the album and by a different producer. It sounds like the rest of the album should sound like. An

excellent effort, in any case.

Last up is the Hentchmen, a mainstay of the Detroit rock scene for the past dozen years or so. Their new album, "FormFollowsFunction," has been tossed into the current trend of modern, glossy garage rock. Though it fits that definition, the band stands out for actually knowing what 1960s garage rock actually sounded like. The album is a dozen simplistic rock songs about the love of cars, the love of girls, girls and cars, girls in cars, etc. It's old-fashioned party music and enjoyable in its simple pleasures.

The album never proves why this should be preferable to the original garage rockers, except for maybe its more sophisticated lyrical approach. In the end it might be more rewarding to pull out the old "Back from the Grave" or "Pebbles" compilations. Basing its sound on instrumental interplay and sing-song melodies rather than speedy riffs, the group is a refreshing take on the old sounds of rock, even if not an original one.

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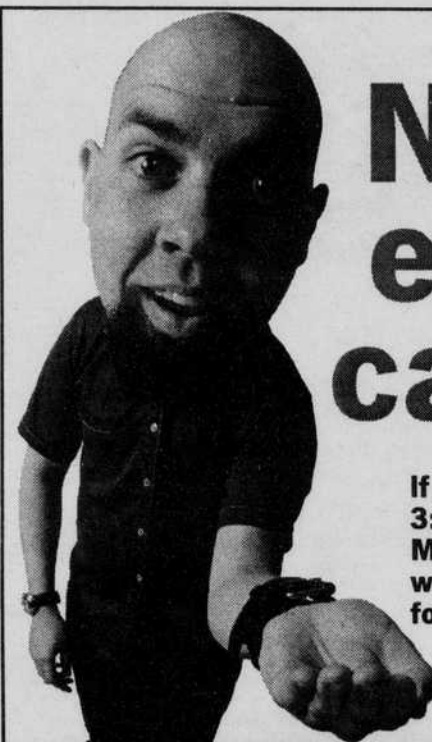
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