

So strong

Sinéad O'Connor's back, Towa Tei's bouncing, the Haggard's bold, the Aislers Set's best

BY KATY DAVIDSON

LAST CENTURY MODERN
Towa Tei • Elektra

Towa Tei really seems to have his shit together. Since his DJ job with the dance group Deee-Lite (famous for the rump-wiggling hit "Groove Is in the Heart"), he has quietly released three quality solo records with quirky samples, assertive beats and all-around creative production.

His latest, *Last Century Modern*, is the soundtrack to the life of a lounge lizard who likes to hang out by the pool a lot. As the title suggests, Tei stirs up a collection of current interpretations of classic styles, such as jazz, funk, R&B and lounge.

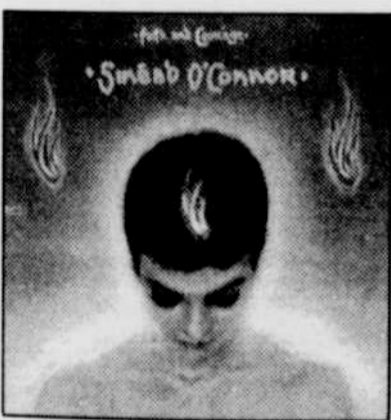
The title track is the most creatively presented song on the record; it's a stew of sounds (accordion, strings and piano) that seem to inhale and exhale together. "A Ring," the second song, is the most catchy. Tei rips his quintessential lounge riffs and rolls them out over a framework of loopy beats and foreign lyrics. The product is a loose grid of sensual sound.

The beginning of "Angel" sounds a little too much like Stereolab, but Tei ends the piece with an amazing, unique rhythmic jam. "Stretch Building Bamboo" first sounds like a robot thinking really hard, then later sounds like a robot thinking really hard underwater.

The record is not flawless. It's a bit boring and predictable at times, but its thread of freshness makes it a worthy pickup.

FAITH AND COURAGE
Sinéad O'Connor • Atlantic

The most surprising thing about *Faith and Courage* is it's actually good. More than a decade has passed since Sinéad O'Connor released her best record, *I Do Not Want What I*



Haven't Got, and she has kept her fans crossing their fingers for a while, hoping this new one wouldn't be the kiss of cheesy death.

Fortunately for those hang-

ing on, *Faith and Courage* is as energetic and peaceful as a newborn baby. It feels as though O'Connor has lived inside the music for many months and finally has been set free.

"I have a universe inside me / Where I can go and spirits guide me," she sings on "The Healing Room," the hymnlike opening track. "There I can ask on any question / I get the answers if I listen." These lyrics set the tone for the rest of the record, making it apparent O'Connor seeks her religion within, not in the stars.

The album's first single, "No Man's Woman," is primed to be a future lesbo anthem based on its title alone, but it's also a truly inspirational song with a rad message. O'Connor asserts: "I never wanna be no man's woman / I only wanna be my own woman / I haven't traveled this far to become / No man's



Towa Tei

woman." The song is upbeat, and it revolves around a chord progression I seem to remember the Spice Girls using a few years back. (Note: The term "wanna be" is also in the chorus.)

The middle of *Faith and Courage* is filled with quite a few quality tracks, but the last three songs are the most calming and beautiful on the whole record. "If U Ever" not only brings back the "U" made famous in "Nothing Compares 2 U" but also is constructed around an elegant Irish flute melody. "Emma's Song" is a lullabylike love song that builds slowly and nicely. The album's final track, an interpretation of "Kyrie Eléison," is everything you ever would hope for O'Connor to deliver.

Fans need not cross their fingers any longer. O'Connor is back, and she isn't completely cheesy yet.

THE LAST MATCH
The Aislers Set • Slumberland

A more ingenious album will not be released all year.

How, you ask, can I make such a sweeping judgment in mid-July? Listen for yourself: the thumping bass drum and wavering guitars on "The Way to Market Station," the triumphant, wintry vocals of the new-wave "Hit the Snow," the heartbreaking storyline of "Chicago New York," the singalong chorus of "The Red Door," the *Pet Sounds*-like composition of "Bang Bang Bang," and the melodies! The melodies! The Aislers Set's melodies are way, way better than even No Doubt's.

The Last Match is second in my heart only to the Aislers Set's haunting 1998 record, *Terrible Things Happen*. Buy both on vinyl, and don't listen to anything else for at least six months.

A BIKE CITY CALLED GREASY
The Haggard • Mr. Lady

Thank God for liner notes. If the Haggard didn't list the lyrics to its songs in the CD jacket, you might not realize how good a conscience ("For Matthew Shepard") or sense of humor ("Tampons") these two Portland-based dykes have.

They perform with such ferocity, the lyrics often get buried by their gruff style. This is the point, though: to rock out hard and loud and fast and tough. And smart. And humorous.

■ KATY DAVIDSON is a Just Out staff writer who loves karaoke more than life itself.

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