

MUSIC

Teen queens

Imperial Teen grows up; plus international glitch, trickles and rally cries

ON
Imperial Teen • Merge Records

Founded eight years ago in San Francisco by Roddy Bottum, an unlikely gay pop music figure during his stint as keyboard player for '80s rap/metal outfit Faith No More, Imperial Teen was a breath of fresh New Wave air.

Bottum recruited friends Lynn Perko, Will Schwartz and Jone Stebbins (all singers who alternate instrumental duties), and together they set forth a nonchalantly utopian boy/girl, gay/straight vibe on two albums full of catchy, rhythmically punchy songs that hid a bittersweet, sometimes sardonic, sometimes darkly sexual, lyrical bite in their sing-song melodies.

The Teens don't sound like Sleater-Kinney, but a comparison is apt; both groups came together at almost the same post-Cobain cultural moment, and both are queer/queer-friendly guitar bands who rock sweet and direct, not self-indulgent or pretentious. Their spiritual forebears are the Go-Go's and the Smiths—not the grim, stifling, (mostly) heterosexual male claustrophobia of grunge.

With *On*, they've released their most accomplished record yet. The guitars are clean and lean, Bottum and Schwartz add keyboard layers to nearly every song, and the expanded musical scope lends an abundant stylistic diversity. The propulsive rockers "Ivanka" and "Baby" are rife with addictive tambourines and hand claps. (The latter has a chorus that irresistibly goes "I love baby, baby is a dog"—it's the best love song to a dog since the B-52's "Quiche Lorraine.")

"Million \$ Man" and "My Spy," with their decadent guitar/keyboard excesses, wouldn't sound out of place on an early '70s Roxy Music album. The sweeping, almost unbearably tuneful "Captain" is the best song the Beach Boys never recorded, and "Undone," for all its melancholy ambivalence about radio hits, sounds deliciously like a should-be radio hit.

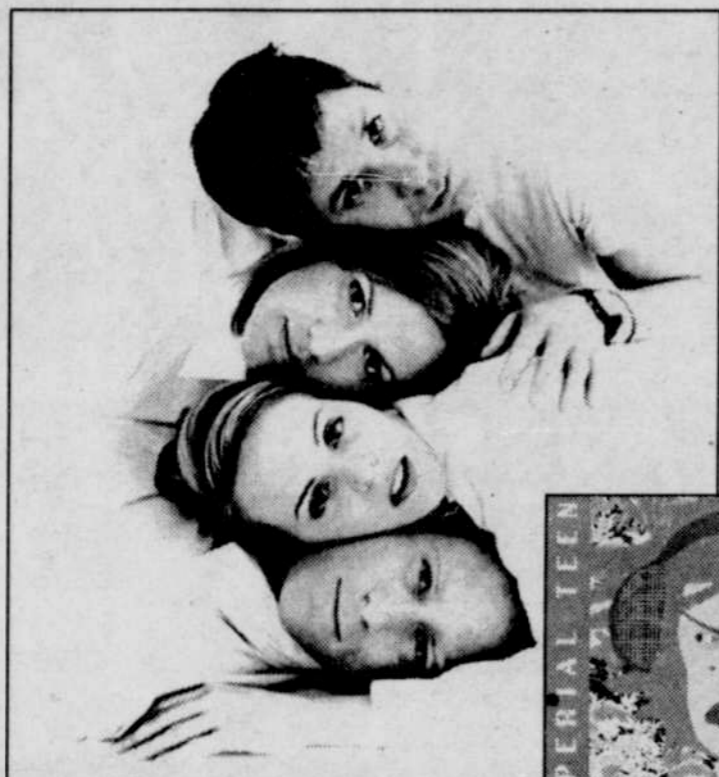
Lyrical, the approach is more subversive than confrontational; the themes are post-modern (media/celebrity on "Ivanka" and "Teacher's Pet," individualism vs. conformity on "Our Time," "Mr. & Mrs." and "City Song"), but it's all too playful and engaging to be a treatise. These smart California kids prefer sassy and wry to preachy, probably (and rightfully) because it's a lot more fun that way.

On actually couldn't have come at a better time; with our pop choices increasingly narrowed to overblown pseudo-earnestness or screeching vapidness, it's good to have sonic proof that the desire to create gratifying ear candy and the need to say something meaningful aren't mutually exclusive.

—Christopher McQuain

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENTS (DESARROLLOS SOSTENIBLES)
Ultra Red • Beta Bodega Coalition

Los Angeles collective Ultra Red, led by the forthright Dont Rhine, offers a recording of depth and power as an adjunct record release party to the exhibition *Democracy When?*



Imperial Teen's latest is right On



Activist Strategizing in Los Angeles.

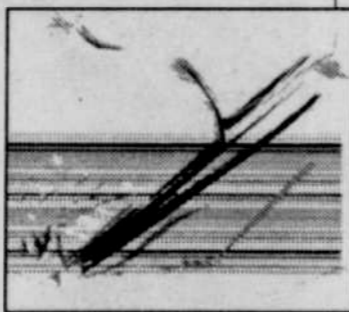
The band's work fights social injustices with sound and action while defying conceptual boundaries. On this recording we have rally cries from the streets and updated techno beats. It's chock full of lush electro buzz and click amid urban tribes telling their stories through chant. Sizzling open wires, street samples and minimal glitch are just part of this urban saga. Alongside understated tribal rhythms, the streets of Los Angeles are presented as a breeding ground of boiling strife.

At just less than one hour long, this performance/exhibition soundtrack aims to provoke a list of visual references. With help from G.R.R.L., Otto von Shirack and Spike, the mix has a sense of confident absurdity in approaching its social criticisms.

Since 1994 one of Ultra Red's main objectives has been creating public installations dealing with issues like queer public sex, housing projects and needle exchange. These audio activists have developed a faceless style to analyze queer class structure at its various points of erosion and have made ambient interpolations that capture the apolitical complacency of the time.

—TJ Norris

TINY LITTLE WHITE ONES (LIKE HANDFULS OF SALT)
Andreas Berthling • Mitek



Andreas Berthling creates micro-wave symphonies of digital glitch. This one—his sixth release since 1999—on Swedish label Mitek was recorded in Chicago and Miami Beach.

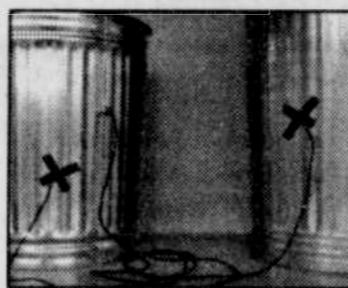
Squeaky noises, drones and static draw multiple images for visual listeners. Replete with samples by Jim O'Rourke, Tomas Hallonsten and Johan Berthling, this gem modifies our contemporary, vibrating culture to a T.

The recording plays on multiple-layered tracks and has a sense of humor as in titles like "while brent was out in the kitchen" and

"the shape of the letter v." Still, as in other works by Berthling, this CD is a pretty serious piece. This one will please fans of Pole, Carsten Nicolai and Vladislav Delay.

—TN

FOUNTAINS
Kenneth Atchley • Auscultare Research



Ground Fault Recordings sublabel Auscultare Research introduces us to the world of Kenneth Atchley's symphonic sculptures here on *Fountains*. This debut is certainly not easy listening, it's active listening.

Like an oblique performance art piece, this disc blends field recordings with a long list of natural and synthetic ingredients accumulating sounds from sculptural fountains. Atchley's academic approach meets where the senses do—sight and sound embedded outside gallery confines.

Fountains treats its listener to rushing floods and other spectacular water-based sources. These trickles, falls and geysers temper the mind's consistency as the noise channels change in tones and drones. The recording documents three

"fountains" (each about 20 minutes in length) dedicated to performers and creative luminaries, inspired by sounds and words, streets and liquids in a range of variables.

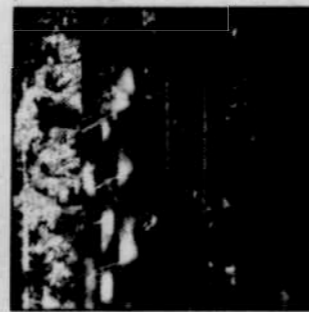
"fountain_1999.20" is a memorial to radical queer composer Phil Harmonic (Kenneth Werner), who performed with Boston's Sonic Arts Union in the mid-'60s, and composer Jim Horton of the League of Automatic Music Composers. This first fountain plays delicately in its wet wisdom of serene and disjointed phrasing.

At the center of this triptych is "fountain_1998.3," an uninterrupted sonic waterfall in which the background noise becomes the foreground to a waning sequencer, barely audible over the din. Inside this barrage of Merzbow-esque tranquillity there are lost slight voices and pitch tests leaking out.

In closing, "fountain_2001.5" drips seductively through organic spaces between crystals and metal objects. Nature's pounding is synthesized, remanufactured and processed. A pleasant, contorted surprise for the lil' surfer in our mind's eye!

—TN

INTEGRACAO
Marc Behrens • SIRR.ecords



Portuguese label SIRR.ecords is making an indelible mark with intriguing releases by artists like Pimmon and Oren Ambarchi. *Integracao* (*Integration*) is like an audio theater piece filled with layers of common sounds and sparse silences; you'll notice yourself moving closer to the sound system.

Marc Behrens has developed intensely intricate and, at times, claustrophobic pieces of eerie brilliance. His work on a Mac is blended with "performance" sounds of Italian forests, collectively pairing our natural and digital worlds. This CD took one year to piece together, informed by trips to Slovenia, Germany, Italy, Spain and England. It is best experienced with one's eyes closed.

—TN

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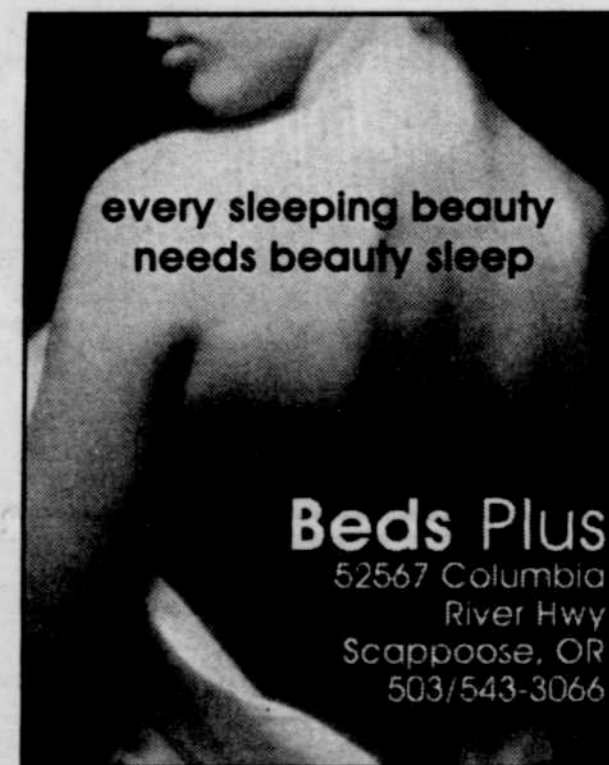
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