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Supper - Tue-Sat 5-22 Sun & Mon 5-10
Breakfast - Sat & Sun 8-3

MUSIC

British invasion

Wise collaborations turn mere U.K. gems into magic

BRING IT BACK
McAlmont and Butler •
EMI International

Bernard Butler is an English guitar hero and all-around pop music Renaissance man whose frenzied, expansive licks and bold, tuneful compositions place him in a lineage that includes Keith Richards, Bowie guitarist Mick Ronson and Johnny Marr of the Smiths.

Also in the proud tradition of Ronson and Marr, he's a bit of a fag hag—a straight man more than happy to work with a male singer/lyricist who's sexually other and flamboyantly quotable on the subject. In Suede, the hyped and beloved U.K. band Butler co-founded in the early '90s, it was epicene, lipsticked Brett Anderson; almost immediately after Butler left the group in '95, he teamed with obscure, statuesque black gay soul singer David McAlmont.

The duo's first album, *The Sound Of...McAlmont and Butler*, was a popular hit and a musical gem, but Butler then embarked on a decent solo career, so it came as a surprise when he and McAlmont announced their reunion last year. The fruition of their second collaboration is *Bring It Back*, and it's fortunate they gave their chemistry a second chance; if the first time was a charm, this one's magic.

From the opening bluster of "The Theme from 'McAlmont and Butler'"—a self-



mythology in which McAlmont pays lyrical tribute to Butler's musical prowess, and Butler defuses what should be the campiness of such a conceit by musically proving every boast correct—to the lush closing ballad "Beat," every tune is so fully realized and passionately invented, it's like hearing soul music for the first time.

"Falling" recalls Phil Spector's "teen-age symphonies" with its power-

ful drumming, roaring guitar and soaring strings. "Bring It Back" features McAlmont doing his own catchy girl-group backup vocals. "Sunny Boy" is an expression of undying devotion from one man to another, and the acoustic-strummed "Blue" gives even Joni Mitchell (!) a run for her money.

Butler's guitar, keyboard and harmonica flourishes float McAlmont's voice like the tide, and that voice is simply a revelation, a cool drink of water to ears that thirst for the rich melancholy and elegant emotion of true soul. McAlmont can roar like Aretha and croon like Dionne; his velvet baritone is Smokey and Marvin in one. He's a genderless angel giving voice to something any human being who's ever loved can relate to.

Bring It Back is currently available only as an import, but don't let a few extra bucks prevent you from experiencing it. It's worth several times what you've spent on almost any other album this year.

—Christopher McQuain

DAYBREAKER
Beth Orton • Astralwerks

As the story goes, music was something Beth Orton just stumbled into.

Really, the young woman just wanted to act. But her voice was her fortune, and she was seized upon by William Orbit, producer of Madonna's *Ray of Light*, for a spoken word audition. The seriously buzzed Brit produced a drunken song instead, after which apparently ensued a week of inexplicable blindness. After that temporary and still-unexplained episode, she became Orbit's guest star, debuting in Japan with the rarely heard of *superpinkymandy*.

Now the 31-year-old's singing career is in full bloom. She has collaborated with such biggies as Primal Scream and Ben Harper. Ed Simons of the Chemical Brothers (who borrowed Orton's vocals on all four of their studio albums) has said: "She's not some soppy girl with Laura Ashley dresses who reached grade seven on the violin. She drives a big old green BMW and lives in Hackney."

Along with that bittersweet voice, Orton has developed her very own folktronica style, somewhat echoing relative artists Hooverphonic, Portishead, Nicolette and Massive Attack. Her ingenious and distinct mix of the electronic and the acoustic appeals to a broad public, including the club scene, which snapped her up immediately.

daybreaker beth orton



The singer/songwriter's first two murky, haunting albums—1996's *Trailer Park* and 1999's *Central Reservation*—are signature discs, displaying folk in a new spicy dress, trip-hop infused with a hint of stylish retro. Both efforts are more elusive and ethereal than their baby sister *Daybreaker*, Orton's most accessible yet.

This newest album is still trippy and laid-back,

but it comes imbued with poppier tones and dense intimate reflections. Don't forget to listen for duets with guest vocalists Emmylou Harris and Ryan Adams and for Everything But the Girl musician Ben Watt's hand in polishing the final product.

Patched together, the lyrics form a delicate emotional metronome of broken and mended hearts ("Tired but I ain't sleeping thinking about some sad affair and why I should be leaving/And we're doing fine now, yeah, we do we don't feel sad or bad or blue"), of giving and wanting ("And I'd do anything to see you smile again/If we should meet again in some darkened room/I hope to my soul it could be soon").

The songs hint at confession, clearly resonating Orton's daily reality. But the details don't matter for long. After a while, the guessing disappears in the magical shroud of vocal sound that sweeps you away in melancholic haze.

—Els Debbaut