

music

Just Push Play

Four queer discs are music to my ears

by Jim Thompson

Sugarfoot

Michelle Malone • Valley Entertainment

As "Tighten Up the Springs," the gloriously unhinged opening track on Michelle Malone's latest powerhouse, *Sugarfoot*, made its debut on my stereo, I immediately realized what Bonnie Raitt might sound like if she lost her record contract and her mind at one time. Unfreakingbelievable, that's what.

The jaw-dropping tunes just keep coming like an out-of-control tractor trailer. The slowly boiling yet eminently radio-friendly rocker "Where Is the Love" showcases Malone's stunning range, vocally and emotionally. "Traveling and Unraveling" achieves near Led Zeppelin-esque levels of blues-rock bombast and features boastful lyrics that describe the exhaustion and exhilaration of life on the road. "Spilling down the highway, I leave a little drop of me in each and every city, where I stop to drop you to your knees."

The breathless, near-orgasmic panting at the end of "Miss Miss'ippi" shows just how hard Malone works to blow your mind and speakers on almost every track, but she's just as effective on the scant number of softer songs that pepper *Sugarfoot*.

Authentic blues rock has come back into vogue lately with pale, often underfed hipsters like the White Stripes and the Black Keys offering their approximations of that style. Unfortunately for them, they've got nothing on Michelle Malone, whose raw, passionate rocking is the posture-free real deal in a way that the Stripes and the Keys might never be able to approach, much less replicate.



Dryland

Chris Pureka • Sad Rabbit Music

Taking in Chris Pureka's *Dryland* for the first time is not unlike listening to the same song for 50-plus minutes. Fortunately for the listener, that mid-tempo Americana song is darn near perfect.

Muted, almost mumbled verses lead to slightly more upbeat, melodically soaring choruses. Gently plucked acoustic guitars, the subtle thud of an upright bass and unobtrusive drum work wrap themselves lovingly around Pureka's world-weary rasp, which suggests an even more rural version of Indigo Girl Amy Ray. Speaking of the Girls, they might want to give Pureka a holler if they ever decide to expand their lineup to three.

Like a runner waiting for the endorphins to kick in around the 20-minute mark, *Dryland* take its sweet time getting to the highlight—the breathtaking "Momentary Thief," all mournful violin, noisy washes of electric guitar and endearingly defeatist lyrics: "I'll tell you what, I'll save you the trouble of running away, I'm already out the door." It's the best song Ryan Adams never shook himself out of a drunken stupor to write.

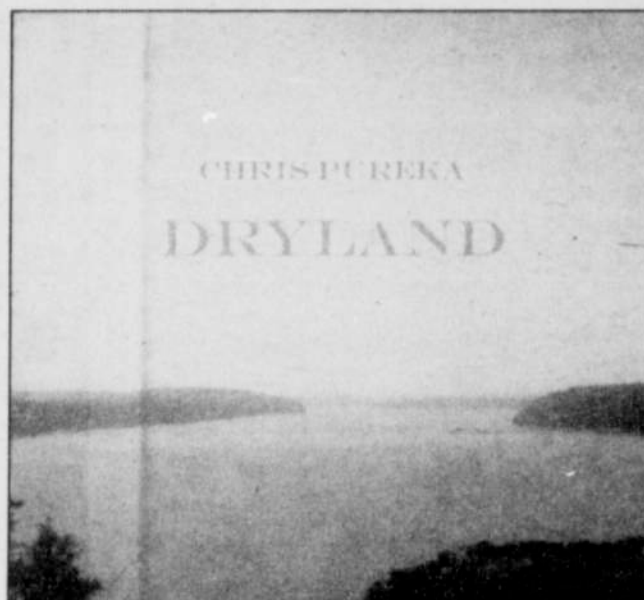
A second standout, "Compass Rose," features lyrics that show modesty as another virtue of Pureka's. "I know that someday I'll offer up a song I was made to play." If *Dryland* is any indication, it sounds as if that day has already arrived.

Awoo

The Hidden Cameras • Arts & Crafts

Many musical artists' works are so easy to describe and categorize that listening to a record after reading a review might occasionally seem like an almost unnecessary formality. The Hidden Cameras are not that band, and although this review of *Awoo* might possibly land somewhere in the ballpark of capturing its essence, it would best be disregarded in lieu of actually listening to the album and drawing your own conclusions.

Lead singer Joel Gibb's vocals, falling somewhere between the earnest joy of Michael Stipe and the unabashed drama of Morrissey, with a little dash of David Byrne thrown in for good measure, occasionally border on annoying, but the songs,



rarely stretching beyond the 3 1/2-minute mark, never stick around long enough for this to happen. The sugary music created by this Canadian collective is jaunty orchestral pop, sometimes galloping at breakneck speed, sometimes soothing like the most effective childhood lullaby.

Awoo is front-loaded with upbeat winners like "Death of a Tune," "She's Gone" and "Lollipop," which distinguishes itself by managing to seem twice as wordy and speedy as R.E.M.'s "It's the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)" and almost totally incomprehensible. The opening line of the very next song is possibly the most fitting segue ever: "Slow down, I'm a slow learner."

Gibb's lyrics on past Hidden Cameras releases were well-known for their queer content, but good luck finding a lot of gay subtext when baffling lyrics like the following are the norm: "How sweet is the curd of my rich qualities, I'd rather wallow in the mud of my imagination, if I am naked on the throne I'll be working in the boneyard."

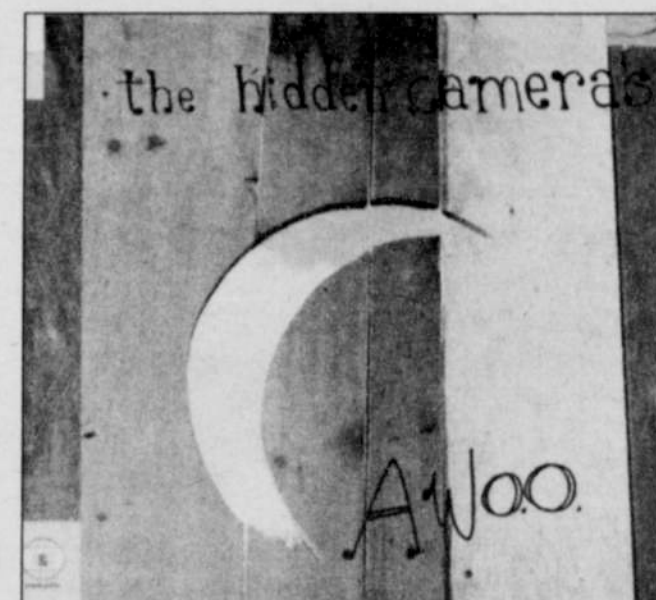
A friend recently opined that *Awoo* would be a great record to make out to, but I'm thinking head bobbing and scratching would be the more appropriate activities. Still, I'll give the kissing a try.

Santimanitay

Slow Train Soul • Quango

I was disappointed to learn, after a quick Google search, that *Santimanitay*, the title of Slow Train Soul's second CD, means "without pity." I was hoping that it meant nothing and I would be able to make it synonymous with hot beats and equally hot vocals, because Slow Train Soul brings plenty of both on its latest effort.

Santimanitay drops you right onto the wrong street at the wrong time with "Mississippi Freestylin'," a trip-hoppy urban nightmare of drugs, murder and robbery. Lady Z's ominous, smoky vocals and Morten Varano's deliberately creeping beat add up to delicious drama.



That first tension-filled track is just the drive-by before a night at the club, with upbeat, electronically tricked-out bangers like "Goldiggah" and "Splinter" satisfying any desire to shake your moneymaker, maybe with one eye on the door, should any of the hard-boiled ruffians hinted at in "Mississippi Freestylin'" crash the party.

After a half-dozen festive dance tracks, Slow Train Soul emphasizes the first and third word in its name with "Sexing the Cherry," a super-classy (except for the risqué title), old-school breakup number that gives Lady Z the chance to show off her impressively wounded vocals while presenting her unfaithful lover with walking papers. "My sky was so blue, it's far from reality, I'm ready for you to pack up your things and get out of town."

If Lady Z says you better go, you better go. With *Santimanitay*, Slow Train Soul shows that there's a time to dance and a time to run for your life. 10

Albany freelance writer JIM THOMPSON has decided to enjoy all that 2007 has to offer musically, such as The Police's Memorial Day reunion in Vancouver, British Columbia; Bob Mould's upcoming release; and Modest Mouse's We Were Dead Before the Ship Even Sank featuring legendary Smiths guitarist Johnny Marr.



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