

Guy Ridley, *Burning My Cashmere*, QUANE STREET RECORDS 2004, By Mark Hanzlik

Burning My Cashmere is truly a solo project from Eugene-based songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Guy Ridley, who wrote, performed, recorded and mixed this beautiful pop album himself. Six years after his last, *It's Bluer Than You Think*, a group effort produced in San Francisco, the wistful-voiced Ridley returns with another batch of originals, where he explores well-worn avenues of love and longing and other philosophical thoughts. Ridley provides stripped-down accompaniment, adding a variety of instruments (piano, guitar, sitar, dulcimer and ukulele) to the basic rhythmic tracks. This singer who sounds much like Al Stewart can't hide his Dylan-influenced songwriting ability.

The Last Emperor, *Music. Magic. Myth.*, RAPTIVISM RECORDS 2003, By Karman M. Ratliff

Music. Magic. Myth., the first studio album released by hip hop's self-proclaimed messiah, The Last Emperor, is packed with clever, perplexing rhymes and inventive beats worth checking out. The Last Emperor, also known as Jamal Gray, is a college grad from Philadelphia on a mission to save the genre from corporate corruption. A one-time prodigy of Dr. Dre, he has also worked with industry greats such as Prince Paul and DJ Jazzy Jeff. His socio-political feelings and his passion for life show up on the album, as the rapper paints a picture of the struggles of city life in songs like "Single Mother." Gray is reflective in "Hold On" and "Meditation," two songs that showcase the rapper's complexity and skill. Also included is a bonus disk containing some tracks that The Last Emperor released earlier, including "Secret Wars II," the fascinating, colorful account of a great battle where rappers are pitted against comic book superheroes in a fight to the death. Put out in 2003, *Music. Magic. Myth.* is a disc that every hip hop lover should get their hands on.

Blonde Redhead, *Misery is a Butterfly*, 4AD RECORDS 2004, By Beth A. Reniff

The newest endeavor by Blonde Redhead is a journey into a state of quiet bliss. Their new album, *Misery is a Butterfly*, can be the auditory comparison to sitting down for the first time after a long day of hard work.



The trio is composed of twins Amadeo and Simone Pace of Italy and Kazu Makino of Japan, who met and formed Blonde Redhead in New York.

Singer Makino's sweet voice fluctuates and drips with honeyed iced tea sexiness, but there is also a sad desperation in her lyrics. Paired with the musical styling of the Pace twins, she turns the words into much more than just beautiful lyrics. Makino's voice becomes an instrument she can play skillfully. Amadeo Pace's vocals are eerie, and they intertwine delicately with Makino's on some tracks and harshly on others. Either way, they are delicious together as singers.

Unlike their past albums, there are no crunchy guitar solos. The guitars are lilting and mellow, paired with melodic piano. The guitar orchestrations are played evocatively and complement the vocals of both Makino and Amadeo Pace.

Blonde Redhead performs March 28 at Portland's Crystal Ballroom.

Ani DiFranco, *Educated Guess*, RIGHTEOUS BABE RECORDS 2004, By Jacquelyn Lewis

Educated Guess, like most of Ani DiFranco's albums, is a true reflection of an artist in flux. In her years on the music scene, she has played with and without a band, and veered between different styles and sounds. Fickle listeners have been known to turn their noses up at musicians who dare to reinvent themselves, but DiFranco makes it work – and she has a fiercely devoted fan base to prove it.

Her latest endeavor is a completely solo effort. DiFranco plays all the instruments and creates all the vocals. It's not her first solo project, but *Educated Guess* is different because DiFranco single-handedly mixed and recorded all the tracks in her home studio. The result is a relaxed, muted sound that lacks the aural punch of her earlier, punk-edged albums. DiFranco's angst-ridden, frustrated girl soundtracks have given way to a softer, groovier sound, as evidenced by 2001's *Revelling/Reckoning*, 2003's *Evolve*, and now *Educated Guess*.

However, this grown-up sound has also led to lyrics reflecting a different kind of angst in a more complex world. Stand-out tracks include *Grand Canyon*, which dissects patriotism and feminism, and *Origami*, a stunning take on relationships ("I know men are delicate/origami creatures/who need women to unfold them/hold them when they cry/but I am



tired of being your savior/and I am tired of telling you why"). Ani DiFranco plays McDonald Theatre April 6. Buy your tickets ASAP; it's sure to be a sold-out performance.

A Perfect Circle, *Thirteenth Step*, VIRGIN 2003, By Shaun Toncray

Maynard James Keenan and company have created a near-masterpiece in *Thirteenth Step*. Featuring a dreamscape of pristinely arranged tracks, *Thirteenth Step* is by far one of the best hard rock recordings in years. Keenan's vocal delivery is dead-on throughout, and the album comes off as deep as any of Tool's greatest works. The broodingly beautiful opener, "The Package," catches the band in all their mystical glory and comes on like thunderheads brewing in a starlit sky. "The Noose" is equally inventive, with its repeated lyric, "Your halo's slipping down/To choke you now." The delicate melody of "Blue" is guaranteed to stir emotions, while "The Outsider" and "Pet" recall such earlier tracks as *Mer de Nom*'s "Rose" and "Thinking of You," as well as Tool's "The Grudge." With unforeseen delicacy, A Perfect Circle flexes their collective heart muscle with the gentle, heavenly "The Nurse Who Loved Me," which is yet another high mark on this masterful hard rock incarnation. This is by far the deepest, greatest hard rock album since Tool's *Aenima*. Put simply, *Thirteenth Step* is more than just another hard rock album ... it is art at its finest. Check it out.

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