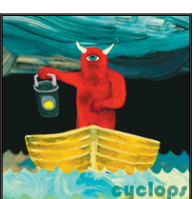


In Tune

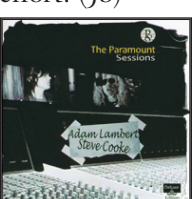
The Daily News

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2011


KURT VON STETTEN, "Cyclops" (Static Motor) ☆☆☆½

— When not playing drums for the Longwalls, Boston-based musician Kurt von Stetten has a burgeoning career as a DIY solo performer. "Cyclops" marks von Stetten's sixth full-length and is a nice follow-up to last year's excellent "Pyramid." He continues to get a little better with each record.

The profanity-laden 12-track release is consistently enjoyable, with von Stetten impressing most on "He's No Writer," "Boxer," "P***y," "Lest They Forget," "Stupid F***" and personal favorite "Indie Rock Kids." You'll have to seek out "Cyclops," but I assure you it's worth the effort. (JS)


ADAM LAMBERT & STEVE COOKE, "The Paramount Sessions" (Coldwater) ☆☆☆

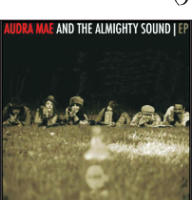
— Fans of one-time "American Idol" hopeful Adam Lambert need to temper their expectations for "The Paramount Sessions." This double album with Steve Cooke was recorded in 2005 — long before Lambert became a household name — and, while solid, lacks the flair we've come to expect from the performer. Lambert and Cooke each get a disc of material penned by songwriter Dublin Jones and they acquit themselves nicely.

Lambert's vocal ability was evident back then, and he serves up a few keepers in "Want," "Fields," "Castleman" and "Hour Glass." Cooke is even better on his songs, delivering the goods on "Radio," "Gravity," "What If This Was All," "Colder," "Sway" and "Almost Home." Lambert had no say in "The Paramount Sessions" seeing the light of day — he's even been critical of the record via Twitter — but it shouldn't have any negative effect on his career. (JS)


NILS LOFGREN, "Old School" (Vision Music) ☆☆☆☆

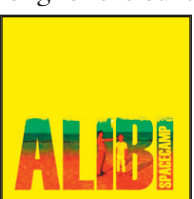
— I associate guitarist Nils Lofgren with his time as a sideman for Neil Young and later his seven-year stint in Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band. But the 60-year-old Lofgren has put together a solid solo career over the past 35 years and "Old School" finds him at the top of his game. His voice is serviceable, if not spectacular, but it's always nice to hear Lofgren wield his guitar.

Several of the 12 tracks focus on aging musicians in a young man's game, and Lofgren scores with the title track, "60 Is the New 18," "Miss You Ray" and "Ain't Too Many of Us Left." Additional keepers include "Amy Joan Blues," "Irish Angel" and "Just Because You Love Me," but you really can't go wrong with anything on "Old School." (JS)


AUDRA MAE & THE ALMIGHTY SOUND, self-titled (SideOneDummy) ☆☆☆☆

— I thoroughly enjoyed Oklahoma singer/songwriter Audra Mae's "The Happiest Lamb" solo debut last year and was eager to hear what she was capable of with new band the Almighty Sound. Amazingly, this five-track EP is even better than its predecessor as Audra Mae comes into her own as a performer.

In addition to four originals, the self-titled slab includes a delightful cover of Tom Petty's "Breakdown." She and the Mighty Sound soar on "Ne'er Do Wells," "My Friend the Devil" and "Ten Cent Pistol." Hopefully we won't have to wait long for the band to record an LP. (JS)


SPACECAMP, "Alibi" (Modern) ☆☆☆☆

— If you enjoyed Lightspeed Champion's "Life is Sweet! Nice to Meet You" album, then you already know a bit about indie rock newcomers Spacecamp. That's because Lightspeed's Dev Hynes had Spacecamp record nearly all the music for the 2010 release. The guys found time to write some songs on their own and have put a few together for the fantastic "Alibi" EP.

The toe-tapping five-track collection of tunes is in the vein of the Killers and the Bravery with their infectious, neo-New Wave vibe. The title track gets things of to a rousing start, and Spacecamp soar into the stratosphere on "Miki D.T.B.," "Teen Idol" and "Red Finger," a protest song about the rigged elections in Zimbabwe. Seriously. This stellar EP has sufficiently whetted my appetite for their debut full-length set to drop next year. (JS)



Cure deliver dynamic live set

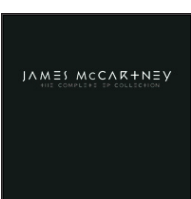
THE CURE, "Bestival Live 2011" (Sunday Best) ☆☆☆☆

— Post-punk innovators the Cure have been around since the late 1970s and have dozens of albums to their credit. They headlined the four-day Bestival on the Isle of Wight in September and, by all accounts, put on an amazing show. You can judge for yourself with the release of the 32-song "Bestival Live 2011," which captures the nearly 2½-hour set in its entirety. This is a must listen for those of us who came of age in the 1980s when Robert Smith and his mates ascended to stardom.

The band pulls out all the stops on their first live recording in almost

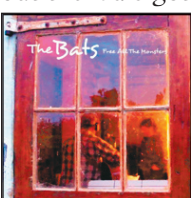
20 years, which features the return to the fold of keyboardist Roger O'Donnell. All the songs you'd expect to hear are included on "Bestival Live 2011," with the band especially effective on "Fascination Street," "Lovesong," "Just Like Heaven," "The Only One," "Friday I'm in Love," "Inbetween Days," "Disintegrations," "The Lovcats," "Let's Go to Bed," "Boys Don't Cry" and "10:15 Saturday Night."

All proceeds from the album sale benefit the Isle of Wight Youth Trust, a charity offering counseling and support services to those 25 and younger. A great album for a worthy cause. (Jeffrey Sisk)


JAMES MCCARTNEY, "The Complete EP Collection" (Engine Company) ☆☆☆

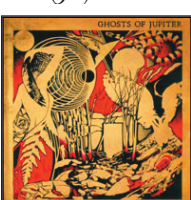
— So do you think 34-year-old singer/songwriter James McCartney feels any pressure being the only son of living legend Paul McCartney? Julian and Sean Lennon have struggled to get out of the imposing shadow of their ex-Beatle father, and the younger McCartney hopes to make it on his own merits. "The Complete EP Collection" combines his "Available Light" and "Close at Hand" EPs, previously available only digitally, and adds a handful of previously unreleased bonus tracks.

The result is a 16-track gathering of tunes spread over two discs that blends solid originals with a pair of cover songs. Among the McCartney-penned tunes, "Angel," "My Friend," "I Love You Dad," "I Only Want to Be Alone" and "Wings of a Lightest Weight" are the standouts. He also delivers a faithful reading of Neil Young's "Old Man" and a rousing rendition of Carl Perkins' "Your True Love." He'll never outshine Sir Paul, but the kid's got some chops. (JS)


THE BATS, "Free All the Monsters" (Flying Nun) ☆☆☆☆

— Though they've never made a big splash on our shores, New Zealand rockers have been making music together for the better part of 30 years. "Free All the Monsters" is just their eighth album overall and first since 2009's "The Guilty Office," but ranks among their best efforts.

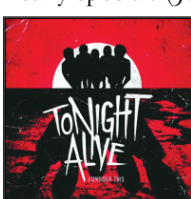
With longtime frontman Robert Scott sharing vocal duties with Kaye Woodward, the Bats fly high on keepers "Long Halls," the title track, "See Right Through Me," "Fingers of Dawn," "Space Junk" and set closer "Getting Over You." There are countless quality bands that have never been duly appreciated by American audiences. It's time we took the Bats off that list. (JS)


GHOSTS OF JUPITER, self-titled (self-released) ☆☆☆☆

— Having garnered comparisons to all-time greats like Led Zeppelin and Cream, as well as modern-day rockers the Black Keys and Rival Sons, Boston psych-rock newcomers Ghosts of Jupiter serve up this good-but-not-quite-great debut album.

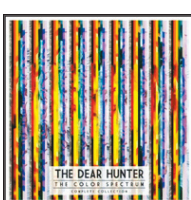
The 10-track release is a bit top heavy, with standouts "Thieves," "Shelter," "Paper Roses" and "Trample on Daisies"

exploding out of your speakers early on. Ghosts of Jupiter struggle to maintain the momentum on the back half of the album, though "Colors of the Queen" and "Passengers" are very good. There's plenty to like about the quintet — guitarists Johnny Trama and Adam Terrell serve up some killer riffs — and with a bit more seasoning, they might give us something really special. (JS)


TONIGHT ALIVE, "Consider This" (Fearless) ☆☆☆½

— Nineteen-year-old blonde lovely Jenna McDougall is more than just a pretty face. She's also the talented vocalist for Aussie emo rockers Tonight Alive, who seem poised for stardom. Having contributed an awesome cover of Mumford & Sons' "Little Lion Man" on last month's "Pop Goes Punk 4," the quintet adds to the growing buzz with this excellent debut EP.

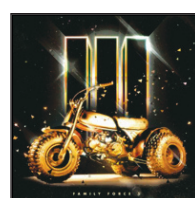
"Consider This" is an excellent five-track introduction to the band, who's full-length debut should drop in early 2012. "Wasting Away" and "My Favourite Thing" are the centerpiece of the EP, though "Five Years" and "Revenge and Its Thrills" are almost as good. Only "Invincible" fails to register, but that one blip doesn't take away from the overall effectiveness of the record. (JS)


THE DEAR HUNTER, "The Color Spectrum: The Complete Collection" (Triple Crown) ☆☆☆☆

— A few months ago we got a taste of the Dear Hunter's remarkably ambitious "Color Spectrum" project. The band wrote songs inspired by the colors of the electromagnetic spectrum — black, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet and white — with each color getting a four-song EP. They trimmed the 36 songs down to 11 for a delightful single-disc release and now the Casey Crescenzo-fronted outfit unveil the complete collection in all its glory.

The boxed set is comprised of three CDs totaling nearly 2½ hours of music, a DVD chronicling the making of "The Color Spectrum" and a 52-page booklet. It'll set you back a few bones, but trust me the set is worth every penny. Almost every song's a winner here, with the Dear Hunter's arrow sailing true on standouts "Filth & Squalor," "Take More Than You Need," "Deny It All," "Echo," "She's Always Siding," "A Sua Voz," "Crow & Cackle," "Trapdoor," "Mandala," "Mr. Mallum," "Lillian" and "No God." A masterpiece. (JS)

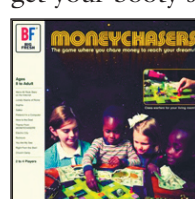
FAMILY FORCE 5, "III" (Tooth & Nail) ☆☆☆ — Christian-oriented party



rockers Family Force 5 have built quite a following blending elements of rock, pop and rap into an admittedly infectious sonic stew. The FF5 formula works pretty well on their third

full-length, the aptly titled "III." Filled with radio-ready tunes that figure to get you out on the dance floor.

Keepers "Can You Feel It" and the ridiculously catchy "Wobble" get things off to a stellar start and set the stage for what's to come. Additional highlights include "You Got It," "Not Alone" and "Dang Girl." These Atlanta natives, like kindred spirits LMFAO and Cobra Starship, know how to get your booty shakin'. (JS)


BIG FRESH, "Moneychasers" (Garden Gate) ☆☆☆½

— Ten members strong, indie pop collective Big Fresh arrived on the scene in 2009 with "B.F.F. (Big Fresh Forever)" and they've expanded on their trippy sound ever since. Singer John Ferguson, who moonlights with the Apples in Stereo, and his mates have cobbled together a delicious sophomore album in "Moneychasers."

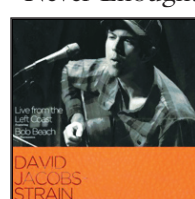
Buoyed by a killer horn section, multiple keyboardist players and new singer Kate Dorf, Big Fresh take us on a cosmic sonic journey on this 12-track release. Among the spacey highlights are "We're All Rock Stars on the Internet," "Sophia," "Electric City" and "Right From the Start." (JS)


PAPA JUKE, "Out of the Blues" (self-released) ☆☆☆½

— By their own account, Colorado blues outfit Papa Juke are the originators of Juke. What is Juke, you ask? Well

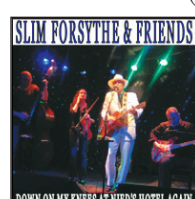
according to the band, the recipe calls for "pouring out some soulful blues and then stirring in a spoonful of swing, a fistful of rock, a bucket of boogie, a slice of country, a ladle of Latin, a pinch of reggae, a splash of Cajun and a generous dollop of old school R&B." I don't know about all that, but I can tell you that Papa Juke's "Out of the Blues" is a heck of a lot of fun.

From the opening strains of "Never Lost Love" clear through to the close of "Weak and Weary Blues," the foursome hit all the right notes. Keepers include "Sizzle," "Love Ladder," "Deliver Man" and "Never Enough." Good stuff. (JS)


DAVID JACOBS-STRAIN, "Live From the Left Coast" (self-released) ☆☆☆☆

— Having earned his stripes playing electric blues with a full backing band, David Jacobs-Strain goes back to basics on latest release "Live From the Left Coast." An acoustic affair recorded at the Rolling & Tumbling in Oregon last year, the 12-track release features Jacobs-Strain on vocals and guitar, and the remarkably talented Bob Beach on harmonica.

The result is a fantastically intimate record that includes several first-rate originals, plus stellar covers of Robert Johnson ("Come on in My Kitchen"), Stephen Stills ("Treetop Flyer") and Taj Mahal ("Big Legged Mamas"). Jacobs-Strain additionally shines on "Rainbow Junkies," "Lookin' for a Home," "Dirt and Wildflowers" and "Play It Again." Highly recommended. (JS)


SLIM FORSYTHE & FRIENDS, "Down on my Knees at Nied's Hotel Again" (Self-released) ☆☆☆☆

— Did you ever stand at the confluence of the Three Rivers in Pittsburgh, or for that matter, the Mon and Yough here in McKeesport, and wonder why so many country and western songs are written about West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and points south while this neck of the woods goes virtually ignored?

Well, local singer/songwriter Slim Forsythe goes a long way toward putting the Steel City on the musical map with this release. It sounds authentically country in a 1950s kind of way, thanks to Forsythe's convincing cowboy persona and the support he gets from the Beagle Brothers, Stillhouse Pickers, Parklane Drifters and a handful of other local country musicians and ensembles.

The sound is straight out of Nashville, but the tracks, which pay homage to the region's history, personalities and institutions — Duquesne Beer, the great American composer Stephen Foster, the Thunderbird Cafe and Neid's Hotel in Lawrenceville, and the Allegheny Mountains, to name a few — pay Western Pa. its overdue respect.

Reasons to listen are more than geographic, however. Forsythe writes good songs that are clever and genuinely entertaining. (Eric Slagle)