



**Billy Bragg** contemplates the Government's track record

by performances that sound as if they are playing for their lives. While few will need reminding of their peerless first two albums, a real pleasure here is the gusto with which the group dispatch songs from the overlooked *Stage Fright* and *Cahoots*. *Time To Kill* is a blast, *The Rumor* an extraordinary showcase for the vocals of Rick Danko, Richard Manuel and Levon Helm, and *Life Is A Carnival* benefits hugely from Allen Toussaint's inspired horn arrangements.

Discs Three and Four give fans the entirety of the last show of the run on New Year's Eve. Appropriately, old friend Bob Dylan shows up for the encore, most impressively on a gleeful *Don't Ya Tell Henry* and a soaring *Like A Rolling Stone*. For the most part, however, his contributions feel like a step down from the level of those of his former bandmates, emphasising just how far they had come. *Jamie Atkins*



## FS Blumm Up Up And Astray

★★★  
Pingpong 39  
**Berliner's faltering flight**  
Remember those big Jim O'Rourke productions, around the time he vacated his seat with genre-hopping art-rock pioneers Gastr del Sol? You know, like *Bad Timing* and *Eureka*, where he conflated the multi-layered arrangements of Van Dyke Parks with the six-string patterning of John Fahey and Sandy Bull? Well, *Up Up And Astray* comes across like their skittish sibling that's been medicating on the maxi-fizz, too loaded on a sugar rush to sit still long enough to let anyone focus. Come on Blumm, give it some air, let it

No doubting, this guy's an accomplished musician, capable of cleverly construed lushness – embellishing his creations with fine marimba, key and horn orchestrations – but too many of these tracks fail to lodge in the ol' cerebellum, slipping out like a bar of soap from the lips of a gummy eel. It feels like Blumm's brought the icing and forgotten all about the bleedin' cake! Things improve when he ratchets it down a notch, as on *Vor Büchsen*, *When You're Gone* and highlight *Zwischen Zwei*. Tender fusions of the kind of schemas perpetrated by Balmorhea, Buckethead and The Notwist, their pace slows long enough for listeners to begin picking up a few of those scattered pieces. *Spencer Grady*

## Lars-Gunnar Bodin & Bengt Emil Johnson Semikolon

★★★★★  
Paradigm PD 29 (LP)  
**Grammasters flash**  
Originally a six-part 1965 radio broadcast commissioned by Swedish Radio, then issued in an edited form in 1966, few will have ever come across or heard this rarity before. Brought back to life by Paradigm in an extended form, this fine vinyl pressing (with hip insert) offers listeners an excursion deep into the Swedish avant-garde; a meeting of language, musique concrete and technical improvisation.

The artists approached the broadcasts using only material and tools that were at the station (such as SFX, noise, tape machines, mics, themselves), so unpredictability and familiarity meet in a surprising fashion. Patience is required to absorb and stay with these occasionally abrasive recordings, but this is rewarded by a series of cohesive clashes in sound that shouldn't really work – but do. Some of the sonic juxtapositions are quite magical, proving that a restricted musical palette is often the mother of audio

## The Bongos Phantom Train

★★★★★

JEM, cat no tbc

**Train in vain**

Emerging from NYC's no wave scene on the cusp of the 80s, New Jersey quartet The Bongos initially recorded for UK imprint Fetish. A keen champion of kindred left-field spirits such as Clock DVA and 23 Skidoo, it seemed the ideal vehicle for the band's early, nervy 45s, *Telephoto Lens* and *In The Congo*. By 1983, though, they'd signed with RCA and embraced the pop mainstream. The video for their first RCA release, *Numbers With Wings*, enjoyed heavy rotation on the nascent MTV, while promotion for 1985's shiny (but now rather dated) *Beat Hotel* involved a profile-raising, yet endurance-sapping, 300-date tour.

Scheduled for release on Island, its previously unreleased 1986 follow-up *Phantom Train* was recorded at Compass Point in the Bahamas, but then abruptly shelved when The Bongos split to pursue solo projects in '87. The plodding Roman Circus aside, hindsight suggests its contemporary release would have served them well. Richard Barone's voice positively soars on the urgent *Run To The Wild*, while either the bold *I Belong To Me* or their robust cover of Donovan's *Sunshine Superman* could have laid the foundations for continued crossover success.

For an LP recorded on a major label budget and wide open to violation from oft-dated mid-80s studio techniques, *Phantom Train* still builds up a convincing head of steam. *Tim Peacock*

## Billy Bragg

*Life's A Riot With Spy Vs Spy: 30th Anniversary Edition*

★★★★★

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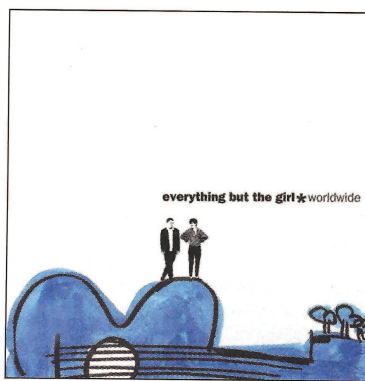
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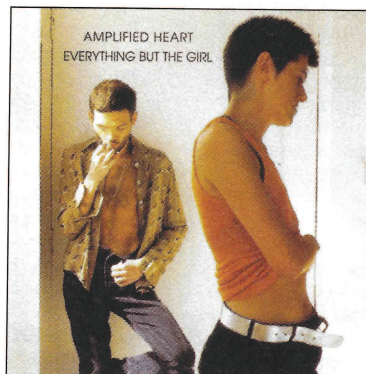
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