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This Week's Fresh Batch Of Discs Reviewed

Cat Stevens

Tea for the Tillerman Live DVD

(Wienerworld/MVD Visual) Although this DVD's short length is unfortunate, it is what it is: a 1971 half-hour concert TV special shot for Los Angeles public television. The program features seven cuts from Cat Stevens' then-current Tea for the Tillerman ("Wild World," "Father and Son"), plus a foretaste of "Moonshadow" from the then-forthcoming Teaser and the Firecat album. Before a reservedly grooving audience of floor-seated hippie youth, the sparsely arranged but energized performances by Stevens and his two backing musicians sound rich on the DVD. And while it yields no surprises, the video does a noble job of preserving Stevens at the key period when he was cementing his distinctive artistic identity and songwriting maturity, along with commercial success and critical acclaim.

As a cool bonus, this release also includes a vintage animated short starring the two characters on the Teaser and the Firecat album cover. In the same countercultural musical cartoon genre as Yellow Submarine and Harry Nilsson's The Point, Teaser and his feline friend have trippy adventures accompanied by Stevens' music. After Teaser dislodges the moon from a barn roof, the moon becomes a disc that the duo rides like a magic carpet through all sorts of weirdness. Predictably, but nonetheless amusingly, their mode of transportation thus casts a moon shadow on the terrain beneath them. - Michael David Toth

Giant Sand

proVISIONS

(Yep Roc)

After nearly three decades as Giant Sand, it seems safe to go ahead and categorize Howe Gelb. He is a bit of an iconoclast - a maverick songwriter who carries himself with a Tom Waits-ian weirdness, a non-singer who refuses to give up the mic. Throughout proVISIONS, the first Giant Sand record since 2004's aptly titled Is All Over the Map, Gelb continues in his efforts to capture the sounds of the Arizona desert, as filtered through cosmic American music and his own strange

sensibilities. And just like every Giant Sand record since the peak era of *The Love Songs* and *Long Stem Rant*, *proVISIONS* is as uneven as it is predictable in its efforts at unpredictability.

Since his short-lived days as a major-label artist (where have you gone, Imago Records?), Gelb has more or less lived in the dissonant-country style that he perfected before anyone had really thought of it. But much like most of the Giant Sand records since the mid-'90s, *proVISIONS* sounds best when it's straightforward. "Without a Word" is easily the highlight, even though it's the album's most conventional number (Neko Case's heavily echoed presence doesn't hurt either). "Increment of Love" carries a bit of Calexico along for the ride, and "Spiral" is pretty and slight. Throughout the second half of the record, though, Gelb's need to noise it up overrides all else, and eventually whatever melodies may have been there become lost in a miasma of seemingly calculated weirdness. Stick with the first half of the album, and you've got one of the year's, and Gelb's, best. - Chris Drabick

Okkervil River

The Stand Ins

(Jagjaguwar)

When Okkervil River released *The Stage Names* last year, the band debated whether or not to make it a double record. It had too many songs and they didn't want to scrap half the material. So the Austin-based indie-rock band released half of the songs on *The Stage Names*, and the other half as this album, *The Stand Ins*. And although the name of the latest release might sound like a collection of also-ran B-sides, *The Stand Ins* is another full-length masterpiece. Organs, synthesizers, guitars and mellotrons are gently layered to create lush orchestration, while the occasional ring of a bell or shimmy of maracas brings life to the songs.

The tracks are gorgeous, well thought out and painstakingly detailed, but Okkervil River's true strength lies in the colorful storytelling of songwriter Will Sheff. Each song tells a story that is steeped in emotion. Sheff writes from the point of view of a wide range of characters - a hardened 27-year-old woman, a voyager lost at sea and a world-weary singer (OK, so that one might stem from true experience). Whether enjoyed for the clever, pop-culture-sprinkled lyrics or the hugeness of the sound, *The Stand Ins* is a fine companion to Okkervil River's 2007 release. The wait was worthwhile. - Danielle Sills

Calexico

Carried to Dust

(Touch & Go/Quarterstick)

Carried to Dust is supposed to tell the story of a Los Angeles writer following a route he found penned on a map purchased at a Yucca Valley swap meet. And while concept albums often get lost in lofty ambition and loose connections, Calexico pulls off this complex project surprisingly well. Whether writing songs about moving through dusty border towns full of fiesta-season glitz

and blare, driving on some endless highway as the sun comes up over the hills or walking the streets of some cold and isolated urban setting, Calexico manages to evoke the romantic zeal of Kerouac as well as the rough-edged survivalist tendencies of Cormac McCarthy. This all sounds a bit too grandiose to be possible, but with songwriters like Joey Burns and John Convertino (they've been working together since 1990) and their ability to craft songs that touch on everything from mariachi zest and country ease to folk-tinged murder-ballad blues, these soundtrack-worthy projects are quite excellent. Of course, having help from a number of collaborators, including Iron & Wine's Sam Beam and harmonica player Mickey Raphael (who's worked with everyone from Willy Nelson to U2), also helps. - Matt Whelihan

People in Planes

Beyond the Horizon

(Wind-up)

People in Planes seems to be playing a strange game of tug-of-war on its sophomore album. On one side, we get the finesse players using the moody chic of Interpol and the serious dance-floor strut of Franz Ferdinand to shake the rope (and maybe some hips) in their direction, while on the other side we've got the muscle: an alternative rock sheen, complete with massive choruses, Daughtry-ready vocal lines and dude-certified rawk. If you're a fan of what the alt-rock stations are spinning these days, then you're in luck. But if you regularly tell people you listen to "indie" when asked about musical preferences, you are going to have to be a bit more dedicated to digging out the nuggets on this record. A song like "Get on the Flaw" demonstrates this battle. It opens with some cello and a break beat, giving you some idea of what Incubus might sound like if they used "Eleanor Rigby" as a jumping-off point. But soon a clumsy, roid-raging chorus kicks in, and any hints of creativity are squelched. It's a disappointing transition, and, unfortunately, this album is full of them. - Whelihan

The Broken West

Now or Heaven

(Merge) The Broken West started its career with a built-in identity crisis. After the group had formed as the Brokedowns, a cease-and-desist from a similarly monikered Chicago punk band resulted in some nomenclature difficulties. The Broken West's label, Merge, had even pressed and delivered copies of the excellent full-length debut *I Can't Go On, I'll Go On* under the old name. After settling on the new one, the L.A. foursome regrouped and embarked on a series of tours behind the power-pop treat *Go On*, and with an excellent set of songs, delivered by a tight band with great harmonies, established itself as an act to watch.

All of this makes *Now or Heaven* an incredibly confounding record: Instead of hunkering down and capitalizing on established strengths, the group has made a record that seems out of left field. Whereas *Go On* was heavily indebted to its power-pop forebears (especially Wilco's *Summerteeth*), the latest sounds alarmingly like Spoon. Not just a little, mind you, but almost

exactly - and certainly enough to be a distraction and call any sense of this band's individuality completely into question. It's not horrible, since many of the tracks are listenable and a few ("Perfect Games" especially) are very well-written. And it's also not out of the ordinary for a band to mess around a bit before settling into its own groove (Spoon used to garner all those Pixies-rip-off accusations, after all). Now or Heaven is nowhere near the strong second-record statement you might expect from an up-and-coming young band; maybe the third time will be the charm. - Drabick

The Reign of Kindo

Rhythm, Chord & Melody

(One Eleven)

The Reign of Kindo has a talent for painting beautiful landscapes of arty emo rock - just like the last band out of Buffalo, This Day & Age. The latter released two albums of gentle, dreamy pop music - penning romantic piano ballads of late-night adult rock and sounding like a mixtape of Keane, Ben Folds and the Autumns - before going on indefinite hiatus in 2006. When singer and guitarist Jeffrey Martin decided to step down, the four remaining members regrouped to form the Reign of Kindo with bassist and vocalist Joseph Secchiaroli.

The band's debut, Rhythm, Chord & Melody, is coated in the same emo artifice and jazzy rock polish as the This Day & Age records. Wisely, each song is still built around pianist Kelly Sciandra, who can spin ivory keys into golden melodies. Highlights like "The Moments in Between" and "Nice to Meet You," crafted around Sciandra's talent for piano atmospherics, float like castles in the sky. Secchiaroli's soul-drenched vocals, reminiscent of Martin's gift for tying that piano with the band's jazz style of rock noodling, help form 12 cohesive pop ballads. The only problem is that the band often overproduces the music, making tunes like "Breathe Again" and "Morning Cloud" too rich (especially with lyrics about Christmas morning). And while the Reign of Kindo has yet to craft a song as exquisite as This Day & Age's "Of Course We've All Seen the Sun," the band still makes great mood music. - Keith Gribbins

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