

Jurassic arc

Four major label J Mascis-auteured monsters from the height of grunge, each remastered and expanded on 2-disc sets, ripe for reappraisal. By **Andrew Perry**.

Dinosaur Jr Warner Bros albums 1991-1997

CHERRY RED. CD/DL/LP

AS THE key bridging act between late-'80s post-hardcore and early-'90s grunge, Dinosaur Jr were rightly fêted in their day, if never commercially garlanded, nor aptly appreciated in the long run. In June 1993, four months after the release of *Where You Been* ★★★★★ – the pick of this quartet of reissues from the band's 1991-97 tenure at Warner Bros – their ever-withdrawn leader graced the front of US alternative rock mag *Spin* with the cover-line: "J Mascis Is God".

Son of a dentist from affluent Massachusetts, Joseph Donald Mascis was Douglas Coupland's Generation X incarnate: with his drawling air of stoner detachment, he was often cast as the archetypal slacker. Yet there was always a tension in his music, between the fierce, adrenalised hardcore punk he grew up with, and the classic rock influences he introduced to its mix. Amid dense, tonally exquisite solos, there were also big Stonesy riffs, deceptively savvy compositions, striking lyrics of disaffection and romantic misfortune, and increasingly sophisticated instrumentation and arrangements.

Before Kurt Cobain, J was already expressing that pervasive antipathy to corporatised '80s culture with an amp-incinerating but never explicitly articulated rage. Once *Nevermind* took that consciousness (and sound) into the mainstream, he may have neglected to milk being deified as the grunge Clapton ("it was so embarrassing", he says of that *Spin* cover, in linernotes here penned by MOJO's Keith Cameron), but the story of Dinosaur's failure to convert their cult status into hard record sales certainly wasn't one of indolence on Mascis's part.

His trio's ascent followed a faultlessly cool path through indie labels Homestead, SST and latterly Blast First, the UK imprint which released 1988's third Dino LP, *Bug*. That messy masterpiece saw Mascis and bassist Lou Barlow recording parts in separate studios due to their mutual antipathy. Barlow left soon after, but *Bug*'s opener Freak Scene alerted major labels monitoring the alternative scene that this band had killer singles in their DNA.

A transitional line-up featuring Gumball's Don Fleming duly cut another era classic, *The Wagon*, for Sub Pop, and a remixed version became the first fruit of Mascis and drummer Murph's new contract at Warners. With its unspecific underdog lyrics ("I ring the doorbell in your mind, but it's locked from the outside") and lurching dynamics, this rollercoaster anthem, messier than *Smells Like Teen Spirit* but just as exciting, had the bonus, at 2:19, of one of J's finest sky-scorching solos.

The rest of *Green Mind* ★★★★★, which appeared in February '91, six months before *Nevermind*, was almost entirely played by Mascis – he'd started out as a drummer in



hardcore unit Deep Wound, so as well as handling guitar, bass and vocals, he stepped behind the kit when Murph hadn't learnt the parts that he (J) had written for him. The slacker king may have actually been a control freak, happiest when auteur-ing records to his own design, à la Prince.

But by the time of *Where You Been*, released exactly two years later, a reconstituted trio – Murph back on fire; statuesque Oregon punker Mike Johnson in on bass – was fully road-hardened and fit to cut perhaps the definitive Dinosaur Jr album. Packed with varied but consistently excellent Mascis compositions – from the mellow-riffed *Start Choppin'* and the exhilaratingly hardcore-paced *On The Way*, through to the mind-blowingly baroque, falsetto-coo'd *Not The Same*, which features a string section once favoured by The Band, hired in at Dreamland Studio in upstate New York, and the sublime *Get Me* (another ineffable solo) – this was the one that should've gone to the bank, but didn't.

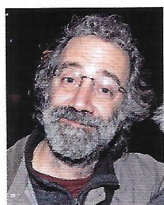
As the bonus live discs with these four Cherry Red repackages prove, Dinosaur Jr upheld their side of the bargain with Warners, touring energetically through the '90s, rarely wanting for zip or high-volume thrills. Murph quit, however, after a dispiriting stint on *Lollapalooza '93*, where Alice In Chains headlined as if to signpost that grunge was now an alpha-male, serious heavy-rock business, not for maverick weed-heads.

Doubtless warned against dawdling lest the alt-moment pass, Mascis hastily served up '94's *Without A Sound* ★★★★★, reverting to solo-in-the-studio mode, with help from bassist Johnson. Landing four months after Cobain's suicide, it was also made under the shadow of its creator losing his father, and accordingly has something of a beaten, lovelorn-country vibe to it. There were still some hot tunes aboard: *Feel The Pain* – "I feel the pain of everyone/Then I feel nothing" – was blessed with a memorably daft video made by hip director Spike Jonze, which helped see *Dinosaur* to a career-best US chart placing at Number 44.

Thereafter, any momentum dissipated, as tastes moved on, budgets were reduced, and *Hand It Over* ★★★★★ slipped out almost unnoticed in March '97 after a pressure-off gestation period of nearly three years. Disparate session locations included My Bloody Valentine's legendarily unproductive home facility in Streatham – no wonder it took so long. Again, this was a Mascis-with-Johnson affair, as J claimed he found it impossible to sync playing-wise in the studio with touring sticksman George Berz. His creative autonomy thus assured, this record's defiantly ear-bleeding, riff-crunching MO could hardly have sounded more passé at that stage. Now liberated from such transient follies, *Dinosaur Jr's* seventh album stands as a lost classic, showcasing the under-heralded depth of J's songwriting, from the heartsore *Sure Not Over You* ("a vibe so bad I wanna puke"), through exhilarating trumpet-toting *I'm Insane*, to the desolate eight-minute *Alone*.

By that year's end, Mascis had pulled the plug and gone solo, soon to emerge with new outfit *The Fog*, but even at this moment of career defeat, great music was flowing out of him: *Hand It Over's* extras include the supremely pretty Brian Wilson homage *Take A Run At The Sun*, which he cut for the Allison Anders movie *Grace Of My Heart*; and of all the versions of *Sludgefeast* reliably belted out across the live discs, the last one from a final tour stop in Stockholm is easily the craziest, and the best.

Dino's unsuccessful major-label stint, at the very peak of record-company dominance, may yet come to be seen as ferocious, inspired and rather exemplary.



BACK STORY: THESE GO TO 11

● While J Mascis would self-produce all four albums Dinosaur Jr made under their Warners contract, he'd draft in trusted engineers – initially Sean Slade and Paul Kolderie, and then John Agnello (above), who later produced *The Hold Steady*, *Sonic Youth* and *Kurt Vile*. All were somewhat in awe of Mascis's high-volume methods. As Slade noted: "J is so talented that he makes it all seem effortless. When he'd do guitar overdubs, literally all the knobs on the Marshall were turned up all the way. When he was playing you literally could not walk into the room. It's really the key to the sound."

Tom Sheehan, Getty

Man at work:
J Mascis in 1991,
at the dawn of
Dinosaur Jr.'s
major label era.

