

Alex Chilton

Take Me Home & Make Me Like It

★★★★

Munster Records MR 372 (LP)

All the way from Memphis

"I know it must be very hard for those of you who are fans of his work to read this. It was a lot harder to live it." So opens Jon Tiven's sleevenotes for this infamous 1975 selection of outtakes and rehearsals of songs that would eventually see release on the *Singer Not The Song* EP and *Bach's Bottom* LP.

An ex-Chess Records employee, Tiven's Big Star superfan status convinced him this would be the ideal record to make his producer debut. He was wrong. Chilton's mission to kick against his past was in full effect and these recordings show it – a cod reggae *Free Again*, two goes at Jesus Christ with a Germanic accent, more impression fun on Lennon's *I'm So Tired...* Add on new wave squiggles and a snarled proto-punk delivery, and you get the drift.

And yet, God knows how, you can't help but love it (well, bits of it). Backed by session players Tommy Hoehn and Rick Clark (renamed The Pukes by Chilton for "regurgitating The Beatles"), the "alt version" of *Singer Not The Song* is a messy treat while *Every Time I Close My Eyes*, a Tiven-written Big Star photocopy, is here twice – once in chiming power pop glory and then a capella, straight from the teenaged Tiven's bedroom diary.

Those notes offer much Memphis mythology. Walls are punched, tapes are stolen, idols are desecrated... but somewhere in this chaos are tunes worthy of the reputation Chilton tried so hard to ruin. Time perhaps to celebrate the song not the singer.

Mike Goldsmith



Commander Cody & His Lost Planet Airmen

Live From Ebbetts Field

★★★★

Rock Beat ROC 3374 (CD)

Fly high honky tonk style

Leader of what *Billboard* magazine once claimed was "the best live band in the world", Commander Cody, aka George Frayne, was never one

to follow fashions. At the height of his fame in the early 70s, a typical live show would find the airmen skipping from the retro rock'n'roll of contemporaries Sha Na Na to the saloon-shaking honky tonk and western swing of Bob Wills or Tex Williams.

Indeed, it was the latter's talking vocal style that informed Cody's own approach to performance, evidenced here in a show from Denver, Colorado in '73, with a cover of Williams' *Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette)*. Sadly, the group's sole US Top 10 hit, the previous year's *Hot Rod Lincoln*, is conspicuous by its absence, the set list favouring larger modes of transport (*Truck Drivin' Man*, *Mama Hated Diesels*).

Key to the goodtime party vibes is the breakneck guitar work of Bill Kirchen, who would go on, many years later, to collaborate with Elvis Costello and Nick Lowe. Having said that, he's just one component of an energetic and eclectic outfit that takes glee in painting the likes of Jailhouse Rock and *Lady Miss Clawdy* in a bright shade of redneck. Terry Staunton

Nikka Costa

Nikka & Strings

★★★★★

Metropolis MRNC 1705 (CD/LP)

Highly strung?

What's it like to be eight years old and have your debut LP top the charts and go platinum? Ask Frank Sinatra's goddaughter, Nikka Costa. That's what she did in 1981 when her self-titled solo album took continental Europe by storm with the single from it, a version of the *Fame* tune, (*Out Here*) *On My Own*, topping the charts in three countries.

Making the transition from precociously-talented child star to a credible adult performer is a difficult one, but Costa managed to shake off the spectre of her past juvenile triumphs when she morphed into a sexy, big-voiced funk-rock diva with her 2001 album, *Everybody Got Their Something*. This latest opus is something of a stylistic departure in that it features a string quartet and the singer's versions of several blues, soul and jazz standards.

Its keystone is an impassioned version of the Sinatra-associated *Come Rain Or Come Shine*, taking inspiration from a string chart that Costa's dad, Don, a famous arranger, had composed for Sinatra. Other highlights include a rousing, anthemic take on Prince's *Nothing Compares 2 U*, and a jazzy reconfiguration of *Stormy Weather*. Charles Waring



Can

The Singles

★★★★★

Mute/Spoon SPOON 60 (CD/3LP)

Does what it says on the tin

These days, in among the stuff you generally wonder about – you know, current affairs, whatever will become of us, *what-the-actual-fuck* stuff – here's a compilation that genuinely makes you wonder why it hasn't been thought of before. The notion of Can as a singles band might seem fanciful on the face of it; but chanting oblique and minimal lyrics over loping, mono-chordal rhythm beds has worked out rather well for entire subsections of pop music in the interim, no? And, lest we ever forget, Can were resolutely danceable, as a kind of side-effect, for 99 per cent of the time; or 100 per cent if you were prepared to lose your shit at around the 15-minute mark during *Aumgn*.

Can – The Singles is laid out logically and chronologically, and makes a convincing, consistent case for the accessibility of enigmatic, semi-abstract art rock when delivered in concise and chewable chunks. True, mile-high choruses and relatable sentiments are conspicuously absent – it's hard to imagine anyone breaking out the Prosecco in the Liberty boardroom when *Turtles Have Short Legs* was released – but seductive grooves and indelible motifs abound.

Consider the tight tremolo guitar and panting disco refrain of *I Want More* (a Top 30 UK hit in August 1976), or *Moonshake*'s seamless, painless, four-on-the-floor propulsion, or *Vitamin C*'s catchy if faintly troubling conceit – "Hey you! You're losing your vitamin C." There's even a sprightly Irmin Schmidt piano figure in *Turtles Have Short Legs* that wouldn't disgrace Gilbert O'Sullivan, until vocalist Damo Suzuki brings the weird.

In their native Germany, it also wouldn't have hurt that several Can singles attained a degree of familiarity through their use in film and TV productions. Both sides of the 1969

debut single *Soul Desert/She Brings The Rain*, for instance, with parched original singer Malcolm Mooney, were pressed into service on *Mädchen... Nur Mit Gewalt* and *Ein Großer Graublauer Vogel* respectively, while the paradigmatic Spoon even slid into the Top 10 off the back of its deployment as the theme music for spy series *Das Messer*.

The crucial significance of the late Jaki Liebezeit can't be overestimated. Can's most compelling compositions organically fall into place around Liebezeit's inscrutable and inexorable drum patterns – and without the drums, some would barely exist. Future *Days* and *I'm So Green* are essentially just rhythms overlaid with diaphanous strands, drifting single filaments of a spider's web, while the single edit of the hitherto 18-minute *Halleluwah* focuses directly into the track's dark, ritualistic heart.

Many have remarked upon Liebezeit's mechanistic funkiness, but it took guitarist Michael Karoli to acknowledge the "dosage" of each hit, an intuitive push-and-pull which would have merited a loose salute from Clyde Stubblefield. And none of this would have worked half as well without bassist Holger Czukay's selfless, zen-like ability to ride out basslines consisting of a single note (*Future Days*), or two at a pinch (*Moonshake*).

In the mood to gripe? You may regard the purportedly humorous versions of *Silent Night* and *Can Can* as a grievous misstep: and if you wanted to be an absolute dick about it, you could point out that it's a worryingly short hop from "they don't wear pants in the hoolah hoolah dance, they do wear pants in the southern side of France" (*Hoolah Hoolah*, from the 1989 reunion album *Rite Time*) to, say, *Superman* by Black Lace. However, Malcolm Mooney and Damo Suzuki routinely plucked phrases from the air for percussive resonance as opposed to deeper meaning – and always did so with the utmost conviction. And if we're talking nuclear bomb paranoia, Mushroom's "I was born, and I was dead" takes some beating for epigrammatic eloquence. *Oregano Rathbone*

Crystal Jacqueline

Await The Queen

★★★★★

Mega Dodo DODO 23 (CD/2LP)

The psych Queen's arrival

We sense there's a proper spring in the step of Devon-based psych, prog and acid folk songstress Crystal Jacqueline, and her musical accomplice and key songwriter Icarus Peel, emanating from their well-received *Mega Dodo* and *Fruits De Mer* records as *The Honey Pot* and under their separate by-lines. That

confidence is simply bursting out of this double album, sweeping across the meadows and babbling down the brooks of their pastoral tunes.

Their songs ooze class with arrangements that are bold and vivid, brass accompaniment in places that gives a new facet to their sound, and textures that sometimes remove them from their natural countryside environment and places them in climes more exotic, with Akhbar, for instance,

being a tasty Moroccan tagine, spicy and sensual. And then it's back to their very English feel, near-Elizabethan at times.

From its cover art to the cohesiveness of its sounds – including that richly vibrant overseas excursion, which never feels out of place – you'd be forgiven for thinking this is a concept album. Less overtly so than Peel's own *Forget-Me-Not* last year, but in the sense of being perfectly joined-up as a whole. It's another big step forward. *Ian Abrahams*