

The Vacant Lots

★★★★

Departure

SONIC CATHEDRAL. CD/DL/LP

Burlington, Vermont duo's garageband manifesto. Mixed by Sonic Boom.

They've covered an Alan Vega track and split a 10-inch with Suicide's frontman, yet The Vacant Lots' primitive minimalism takes cues too from the Mary Chain and New Zealand's kings of diseased rock Snapper, throwing electronics and Krautrock into the muddy mix. Jared Artaud (guitars, vocals, Wurlitzer) and Brian MacFadyen (electronics, vocals, drums) pack a pummelling version of cultural vacancy, though they're a tad predictable; when they slow down, Paint This City and Before The Evening's Thru both ride that familiar Spector backbeat. Artaud's stated love of Baudelaire and Kafka suggests a man of letters but you wonder which inspired, "I've got love in my front pocket/I'm rolling through town." The one deviation is the Velvets-style spoken-word churn of Make The Connection – at 10 minutes it's the duo's own Frankie Teardrop and plunges deep into the damaged soul of the Vacants' no-frills thrill.

Martin Aston

– but Adult Jazz are simply too watchful to let their songs drift. *Gist Is* feels like an urgent conversation, a record driven by compulsion; fortunately, tuning in to its internal dialogue is a pleasure.

Victoria Segal

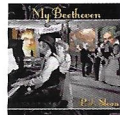
P.F. Sloan

★★★★

My Beethoven

MS MUSIC PRODUCTIONS. CD/DL

A '60s legend gets serious with new pop opera.



Phil Sloan has been off the scene for much of this century. And even back in the '60s, after penning a much-hailed array of hits for acts ranging from Barry McGuire, Jan And Dean and Johnny Rivers through to Herman's Hermits, he had Jimmy Webb wondering where the hell he had gone. His current return sees Sloan completely reinvented. Once an OK guitarist, he's now learnt piano. Additionally he's studied composition alongside orchestral arrangement and assimilated every bit of info he could find to construct a distinctive pop opera. The result is a worthy song-cycle that echoes an affinity with the classical giants – "feels like I've been working a hundred hours but it's only one in the afternoon," he claims about the traumas of music creation at one point. But the final result is a would-be stage musical – albeit one short on melodies to be whistled.

Fred Dellar

don't suffer fools gladly") sounds like a soulful take on The xx or Good Fortune-era P.J. Harvey, while what might be an anti-war epistle, Exit Plan ("Death is swallowed up in victory"), could be a saturnine Patti Smith, and the funeral-paced Old Knives summons the cosmopolitan gothic blues of the latter-day Bad Seeds. Only a dearth of melodic variation disappoints.

David Sheppard



Marc Almond

★★★★

Ten Plagues

CHERRY RED. CD+DVD

The erstwhile Soft Cell frontman tackles a deadly theatrical song cycle.

Penning by playwright Mark Ravenhill, with music by Conor Mitchell, *Ten Plagues* is an account of the Great Plague of 1665, told by a remorseful survivor. Composed specifically for Almond, the never-stated modern subtext is the AIDS virus that did for many of the singer's friends. Almond tackles the often tricky, convoluted melodies with great gusto, turning in bravura performances on the most emotionally wracked pieces such as The Pit and Seeing You. His attempts at operatic coloratura in The

Market may be contrastingly amateurish, but the emotion of a hungry man, afraid to eat for fear of contagion, remains palpable, even if the libretto here is risibly expositional ("There's a pig hung up that I desire"). The accompanying DVD of *Ten Plagues* staged at London's suitably antique Wilton's Music Hall, with Almond in periwig-sporting excelsis, makes more sense.

David Sheppard

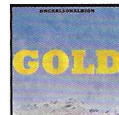
Drcarlsonalbion

★★★★

Gold

DAYMARE. CD/DL/LP

Earth man goes way out west.



Ever since 2011, Dylan Carlson has had a second self. As well as continuing to front drone-doom incantators Earth, he has also been performing and recording as Drcarlsonalbion, exploring English gnosticism and ancient folk wyrdness through recondite musical performances. Oddly, the most recent malus fruits from this strange orchard are 24 atmospheric guitar miniatures for a German western, Thomas Arslan's existential 2013 horse opera in which little happens and everything unsettles. Removed from the cinematic experience, designed as one continuous suite, Carlson's soundtrack (his first) suggests an unholy union of Neil Young's *Dead Man* score and Florian Fricke's plangent '70s work for Werner Herzog, immersive six-string electric

feedback improvisations that bring a wooded Northern renaissance dread to the wind-in-wires landscapes of the partitioned west.

Andrew Male

Luluc

★★★★

Passerby

SUP POP. CD/DL/LP

Brooklyn-based Aussie duo offer quietly seductive second album.



Zoë Randell and Steve Hassett's 2008 *Dear Hamlyn* debut as Luluc was an assured

if low-key affair, but its slow-burning, timeless folk-pop craft won them a clutch of significant fans, not least Sub Pop honcho Jonathan Pone-man, who duly signed them, and The National's Aaron Dessner. The latter produces this belated successor with rare subtlety, building an unobtrusive but always enriching patina of piano, electric guitar, harmonium, percussion or brass around Randell's still, chaste but luxuriant vocals and gently picked acoustic guitar arpeggios. Thusly decked out, the album's 10 restrained but emotionally compelling songs recall the smouldering meditations of The Innocence Mission, Sibylle Baier or Low, while numinous, harmonically plangent opener Small Window wouldn't have sounded out of place on Simon & Garfunkel's *Bookends*, and the hauntingly pretty Reverie On Norfolk Street sounds like a great Lucinda Williams outtake.

David Sheppard

Adult Jazz

★★★★

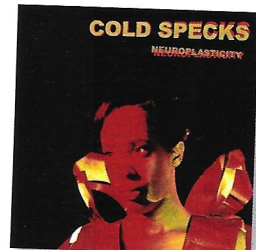
Gist Is

SPARE THOUGHT. CD/DL/LP

Leeds' alt-pop voyagers spring into action.



"I fast alone!" sings Harry Burgess on Bonedigger, the closing track on Adult Jazz's dynamic debut. Disturbingly excited as he is by this, though, the quartet could comfortably break bread with These New Puritans, Dirty Projectors or Wild Beasts, all bands guided by earnest experimental impulses. The songs on *Gist Is* are alert, uninhibited and volatile, cryptic lyrical fragments – about eating, running, dreams – making it seem as if a big revelation is imminent. The rusty blues of Springful suddenly jumps up and pulls itself together with a metallic twang and clatter, a pots-and-pans Björk, while Spook alternates dreamy pastoral with sudden febrile spikes. It can almost seem roughly improvised – the stop-start Hum, for example



Cold Specks

★★★★

Neuroplasticity

MUTE. CD/DL/LP

Canadian 'doom soul' purveyor Al Spx (aka Cold Specks) returns.

Cold Specks' 2012 debut *Predict A Graceful Explosion* was long on world-weary, gospel-tinged indie-folk, its dustbowl dry, minor chord-heavy songs filled with images of winter and death, and delivered with Al Spx's compelling, blues-tinged voice – Mahalia Jackson via Grace Jones. Written in a Somerset cottage, *Neuroplasticity* largely picks up where its predecessor left off, but adds a sonic spaciousness, with reverberant drums, eerie, ethereal keyboards and spidery guitars framing Spx's up-front delivery. Thus, the mission statement-like, 12-string-caressed Absisto ("I



Cold Specks' Al Spx: Doesn't suffer fools gladly. Who does?