

NEIL DIAMOND

The Very Best Of Neil Diamond

(Columbia/Legacy)

Let's start with the obvious: Diamond is the king of schmaltz. With few exceptions, his tunes are sappy and syrupy. Yet, take away the overwrought strings and hammy phrasing, and it's hard not to be awed by his artistic genius.

From the early 1966 numbers ("Solitary Man" and "Cherry, Cherry") through his less-familiar 21st century fare ("Pretty Amazing Grace" and "Hell Yeah"), each cut is a captivating blend of lyric and melody. Long-time Diamond devotees won't find anything fresh among the 23 studio tracks, and a few hits are AWOL ("Longfellow Serenade" immediately comes to mind), but it's an ideal package for casual fans, and an effective primer for apprentice songwriters.

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Jeff Berkwitz

Appearing: 7/6 at United Center.

FRANK ZAPPA

From Straight To Bizarre: Zappa, Beefheart, Alice Cooper, And L.A.'s Lunatic Fringe

(Sexy Intellectual Productions)

Zappa geeks will dig this no doubt, but for anyone interested in learning about one of the first attempts of an established artist to buck the major-label system and take full control of the music-making machinery, this 160-minute documentary will prove in some ways enlightening and in other ways simply an interesting slice of rock 'n' roll history. In 1968, Zappa and industry vet Herb Cohen wanted to take full control over not only Zappa's music and career, but also establish an alternative path for other artists. But as the film shows, running a label from top to bottom is a time- and energy-consuming endeavor. The two labels sure had some hits: a number of Zappa and The Mothers albums, Alice Cooper's first three, and the fabled Captain Beefheart opus *Trout Mask Replica* stands as Straight's crowning achievement. But the labels produced plenty duds, including the groupie band The GTOs and the seemingly talentless Wild Man Fisher. This documentary, not sanctioned by the Zappa estate, features some great archival footage and images, a handful of primarily British biographers, members of the labels' bands (though not the stars you might expect), and groupie legend Pamela Des Barres offers some unique insight into Zappa's world.

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Michael C. Harris

BLACK BREATH

Sentenced To Life

(Southern Lord)

While not exactly a full-on, straight-up thrash album, Black Breath's follow-up to its filthy, crust-inflected debut, *Heavy Breathing*, clearly is indebted to thrash pioneers – especially Slayer. Coarse, ravaged vocals and speedy riffs tear against whiplashing tempos, and there's noticeably less interest in cultivating a groove. You could squeeze "Mother Abyss" in between "Angel Of Death" and "Piece By Piece" and not lose a moment of carnage or chaos. Kurt Ballou's production, while still hardened to bullet-proof density, is less cavernous and not quite as monolithic as listeners might be expecting, which simply allows Black Breath to hammer home its

blasphemous message with sharpened intensity. A brutal, bludgeoning assault that doesn't rely on breakdowns – now, that's a breath of fresh air.

Patrick Conlan

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LINDSAY FULLER

You, Anniversary

(ATO)

Like every Southerner, Lindsay Fuller can tell a good story; and like any good artist, this Alabama-born now Seattle-based guitarist/singer/songwriter crafts her stories into powerful music – whether likening the asbestos contamination of Libby, Montana, to having one's breath taken away by a girl of the same name, waxing on the plight of Grey Gardens' Little Edie, or what the impact of Cupid's love might be if he wielded a shotgun rather than bow and arrow. As good as it all is, there's one nagging problem for this listener: somehow Fuller's enunciation has been lost in the transition of her alto voice from south to north, often garbling the words and muddying the impact this otherwise excellent recording should have.

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David C. Eldredge

Appearing: 5/9 at Shubas

MENEW

Wide Awake Hello

(The Orchard)

Nobody could have predicted the three Toronto-based brothers known as Menew would eventually find their way off the Christmas-tree farm into the studio to record an alt-rock record. But *Wide Awake Hello*, the trio's debut, proves it can happen. While relying mostly on anthemic guitar hooks, Menew manage to avoid previously overrun territory of Nickelback, and instead infuse some Killers and Filter (with whom they are touring) electronic edge into its post-grunge rock. Tracks like "Can't Help Myself," "Fighter Orphan," and "Never Let Go" are the most memorable, and also sound the most like Brandon Flowers and co. (coincidence?), while other tracks channel slightly darker White Lies and aren't nearly radio-friendly, but are still intriguing.

Carter Moss

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BIG BROTHER & THE HOLDING COMPANY FEATURING JANIS JOPLIN

Live At The Carousel Ballroom 1968

(Legacy)

This recording, made a few months before Janis Joplin gave Big Brother & The Holding Company her departure notice, is the real deal: warts and all. The band's Columbia debut, *Cheap Thrills*, was a studio album doctored to make it sound live; *Live At The Carousel Ballroom 1968* contains the band as they actually were on stage. There are mistakes and a lot of the backing vocals are off, but hey, there was no one else making music like this 45 years ago.

Joplin standards like "Combination Of The Two," "I Need A Man To Love," "Piece Of My Heart," "Summertime," and "Ball And Chain" are here, as are some rare tracks like "Coo Coo," "Catch Me Daddy," and "Flower In The Sun."

It's understandable why Joplin was pressured into leaving Big Brother – as musicians, they were mediocre at best. Guitarists James Gurley and Sam Andrew, bassist Peter Albin, and drummer Dave Getz provided a good springboard, but she clearly is the standout, here.

Bruce Pilato

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