

# Free Times - Ohio's Premier News, Arts, & Entertainment Weekly

## Music

Volume 15, Issue 55

Published May 21st, 2008

Discourse Feature

## Ween

The Friends Ep (chocodog)

Originally released in the UK last summer in advance of last fall's full-length *La Cucaracha* disc, this EP of five exclusive Ween cuts has finally received domestic US distribution. Because of their brevity, EPs by nature have to make every track count to be of much consequence. Fortunately Gene & Dean are five-for-five here, serving up a fine platter of gourmet cheesiness. Ween's hit-worthy melodies, chameleon vocals and baffling genre-bending arrangements are all in fine form.

An alternate version of "Friends" appeared on *La Cucaracha*, but this EP mix renders the album's version totally obsolete. The song's kitschy super-saccharine dance-club electronic syrup is cranked up here past 11. "I Got to Put the Hammer Down" serves up more dance grooves, but with a funkier, darker, '80s-synth urban edge, all to great effect. The ska/dub number "King Billy" is almost too straightforward, but the longer it goes, the more endearingly weird it becomes, with some dizzying, belching electronics building atop the Jamaican beats. The pseudo-salsa "Light Me Up" manages to be strangely reminiscent of a slew of gringos ranging from Billy Joel to Joe Jackson. The closing epic ballad "Slow Down Boy" sounds as if it would have been the soundtrack to slow dances at every high school prom in the late '70s/early '80s if its lyrics weren't about gay heartbreak. All five explorations in bad taste are quite accessible, likeable tunes. — *Michael David Toth*

## We Are Scientists

*Brain Thrust Mastery* (Astralwerks)

The cover of *Brain Thrust Mastery* seems pretty apropos. It's a photo of singer-guitarist Keith Murray and bassist Chris Cain seemingly passed out in their Grammy-night tuxedos. It's certainly tongue-in-cheek — after all, NME spilled plenty of ink covering Cain and Murray's shenanigans over the last few years. But it's certainly an allusion to the fact that the follow-up to their fame-winning debut, *With Love & Squalor*, could very well be a brutal comedown after years of partying. If *With Love & Squalor* made the band seem like late-comers to the danceable punk gold rush, *Brain Thrust Mastery* makes the band sound like late-comers to the '80s revival.

Although the album begins with the brooding "Ghouls," in which Murray confesses, "We all

recognize that I'm the problem here," the only other breather on the album is the token power ballad "Spoken For." "Lethal Enforcer" is a perfectly crafted slice of '80s pop whose production is reminiscent of *Let's Dance*-era David Bowie, or even *Tin Drum*-era Japan, complete with dramatic synthesizers. It's enough to make the listener wonder just how the hell they were able to achieve that perfect throwback sound. The '80s worship on that track is almost equaled by the saxophone-drenched "That's What Counts," which sounds like something Spandau Ballet cooked up. The band's danceable-punk sound is still there as witnessed on barnstormers like "Impatience" and "Chick Lit." "Tonight" sounds a bit like harder-edged contemporaries Bloc Party. Although these tracks wouldn't have seemed out of place on *With Love & Squalor*, they don't quite have the instantly hummable hooks from that album. — *Jeremy Willets*

### **Jason Mraz**

*We Sing. We Dance. We Steal Things.* (Atlantic)

Jason Mraz is one of those songwriters like Jack Johnson, to whom he sounds awfully similar at moments on this album, who's perpetually likeable. Mraz can do something completely off-kilter, like rap (which he has been occasionally known to do), and it still sounds like something your grandma would find charming. *We Sing. We Dance. We Steal Things.* is the singer-songwriter's third album, following 2005's oh-so-cleverly titled *Mr. A-Z*, and his ability to craft a catchy (but not too poppy) song with universal appeal has only grown stronger.

"Lucky" finds Mraz professing his luck to be "in love with my best friend" in a rather lovely duet with singer Colbie Caillat, while "Butterfly" explores Mraz's R&B influences, sounding a bit like a toned-down, unsexed Justin Timberlake. Opening number "Make It Mine" and first single "I'm Yours," though, showcase Mraz at his finest. He succeeds when he isn't employing bizarre sonic techniques or alternating between singing and spoken word, and just sings a happy, engaging pop song that would be appealing to anyone who happened upon it. It's admirable that Mraz explores his musical boundaries with such confidence and fervor, but his real strength is the simplest one, namely making a solid song everyone will like. — *Emily Zemler*

### **Blue Skies for Black Hearts**

*Serenades and Hand Grenades* (King of Hearts)

Don't let the band name, or the album title fool you: This is not that sort of eyeliner-wearing, faux-suicide MySpace-photo taking screamo you're expecting. Blue Skies For Black Hearts may have heartbreak on its mind, but it's the type that sunny pop groups from the '60s used as inspiration for hit after hit. With the Rickenbacker guitar tones, bubble-gum backing vocals, mod drumming and penchant for tremolo, BSFBH doesn't try to hide its love for the '50s-rock-meets-girl-group pop that was so prevalent during the British Invasion.

As far as contemporary artists go, BSFBH seems to fall into the same school of indie-pop as bands like the Shins and Rogue Wave. The major difference seems to be that while those two bands take their '60s influences and incorporate them into a much more modern sound, BSFBH is content keeping it old school. This isn't an issue when it works, such as on songs like the doo-wop-inspired

"Siouxsie Please Come Home" or the Kinks-sounding "Pretty People." But elsewhere it seems to be a crutch for a merely retro-obsessed band. Pop is pop no matter what the form, however, and BSFBH know how to write a catchy song. — *Matt Whelihan*

### Various Artists

*Shadow Music From Thailand* (Sublime Frequencies)

The worldwide phenomenon of the acid-soaked '60s has had an explosion of unparalleled effects on nearly every aspect of musical culture, both popular and underground. Over the last few years, Alan Bishop's Sublime Frequencies label has been slowly churning out the acid-fried remains of teenagers from the Mideast, Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America and beyond wailing unabashedly about drugs, sex and revolution in two dozen languages, from the '60s to today. One of the most recent uncoverings concentrates on the folk and pop sounds of the tropical kingdom of Thailand, augmented through the zeitgeist of the '60s, specifically with UK band the Shadows having the most direct effect on the sound and coining the name of the style. Echo-delayed guitar and organ mutated perfectly with masterful Thai melodies, resulting in two sides full of dark, eerie tropical surf, droning garage psych and mesmerizing tribal-like instrumentals interpolated with skittering guitar work.

What's unique about these recordings, as opposed to some of the great mindless guitar banging by teens who picked up an axe five minutes before they recorded with it, was that the psychedelic explosion hit the brains of mostly well-versed musicians, many of whom had already had Thai jazz groups, which gives an unbelievably tight and dense sound to the floating, colorful instrumentation. The manic, cutting sounds of Jupiter, P.M. 7, Johnny Guitar, Pocket Music and Son Of P.M featured on this record originated this cosmic voodoo-mesh of damaged psychedelia more so than the well-known artists that came out of this movement in the late '60s and early '70s, such as the Impossibles and Rewat Bhuddinan, and are a stunning addition to the catalogue of Thailand's already lush musical history. — *David Imburgia*

[music@freetimes.com](mailto:music@freetimes.com)

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