



best on “There Can Be No Thought of Finishing” and “So That No Matter.” Another impressive chapter in Pan-American’s deep history. (Ryan Potts) [myspace.com/panamericantrue](http://myspace.com/panamericantrue)

**PETER BJORN AND JOHN**

Living Thing CD – Almost Gold / StarTime International

You can deny it all you like now, but chances are good that you danced your ass off to Peter Bjorn and John’s “Young Folks” a few years back. Sure, the charms of *Writer’s Block* wore off pretty fast, but you have to admit, it was fun while it lasted. And sometimes, that’s all that matters: fun. *Living Thing*, on the other hand, is about as fun as a Monday morning root canal. Save for a few jovial moments (the drum-machine ricochet of “It Don’t Move Me” and the schoolboy sing-a-long of “Nothing to Worry About” do the trick), the Swedish trio’s fifth album (their fourth Stateside) has all the makings of a band trying too hard to unchain itself from the past. “The Feeling,” “I’m Losing My Mind,” and “4 Out of 5” plod along begrudgingly, wrapped up too tightly in their slow, viscous beats. “Lay It Down,” however, is the worst offender, destined to be remembered for its opening line, “Hey, shut the fuck up boy / You’re starting to piss me off.” Yikes. Perhaps it’s a bit unfair to set such high expectations. After all, no one ever mistook Peter Bjorn and John as an introspective headphone band. But with *Writer’s Block*, at least you could throw it on at a party. What can I do with *Living Thing*? Not much, it appears. (Andy Hurst) [peterbjornandjohn.com](http://peterbjornandjohn.com)

**THE PHANTOM BAND**

Checkmate Savage CD – Chemikal Underground All overused references to the magical, creative waters in Glasgow aside, just what the hell is in the water in Glasgow? There is no way a city can produce this many disparately good bands year after year. For all the talk about the like-minded scene bands in that fair city, there are just as many opting to jump out of line to chase the magic music dragon down more adventurous paths. The Phantom Band is one such band who are garnering substantial industry buzz for creating its own sound. Taking direct musical cues from Stereolab, Thee Oh Sees, Beach Boys, Frank Zappa, Yo La Tengo, Super Furry Animals, and dozens more, The Phantom Band manage to make music that is completely theirs alone. “Folk Song Oblivion” shakes up long-dormant memories of hearing The Beta Band for the first time and will have the hairs on your arms standing at attention. The rest of *Checkmate Savage* is crammed full with similarly quality goods. The sprawling “Crocodile” is a highlight among many highlights, and it is an

instrumental for Pete’s sake! Allegedly taking their name from their own past propensity of changing band names every time they played live, The Phantom Band is a mysterious delight and something truly special. *Checkmate Savage* is easily the early front-runner for album of the year. (David Nadelle) [phantomband.co.uk](http://phantomband.co.uk)

**THE PICA BEATS**

Beating Back the Claws of the Cold CD – Hardly Art In its quaint blending of twee sentimentality and expansive but lo-fi aesthetics, The Pica Beats conjure an unmistakably familiar but not easily attributable sound. Obvious reference points like The Decemberists, Belle and Sebastian, and Neutral Milk Hotel account for singer Ryan Barrett’s warbly loquaciousness but their music is not compelled towards those artist’s bold theatrically. Instead, *Beating Back the Claws of the Cold* has a sense of inwardness that feels distinct and intentional, its carefully compacted songs sounding as if they were hermetically sealed upon recording. Whether it be nondescript instrumentals (“Martine as Heavy Lifter,” “Beta.Space.Hit.”) or bouncy pop ditties with melodies that never deliver (“Summer Cutting Katie”), The Pica Beats seem impervious toward the cultivation of their songs outside the general nostalgic mood their album creates. The band meanders through a series of homages and experimentations (kudos should be awarded on Barrett’s persistent use of the sitar in a non-psychedelic context), finding small victories in the recognizable comforts that these can provide. (Matthew Siblo) [thepicabeats.com](http://thepicabeats.com)

**PLASTIC CRIMEWAVE SOUND**

Plastic Crimewave Sound CD – Prophase Music / MVD Audio

Unless you’re a devotee of Plastic Crimewave (aka Steve Krakow) and his Galactic Zoo Dossier, you’d be pretty hard pressed to possess some sort of comprehensive knowledge regarding his band’s discography. This self-titled album, when contrasted with previous efforts, still manages to deliver downer psychedelia on par with even the double-disc *No Wonderland*. But this new release seems to include a great deal of singing in a cheese-ball punk fashion. Still, no one throws on a slab from Plastic Crimewave Sound for the mellifluous vocals. Everyone’s here for the stoned sounds of the past reverberating through modern recording equipment. And really the most pleasurable go-round here comes in the form of the album closer. In true jam band fashion – get over it, that’s what they are – the latest lineup of Plastic Crimewave Sound gives listeners “The Pasture/We Know/Dead Sun/Pasture Jam,” which mixes together

like spiked punch incorporating harmonica some delayed, eerie, and echoing guitars, Ramapithecus drumming, and enough open space to make Ahmad Jamal wonder. Even as this number launches into Hawkwind territory around the eight-minute mark, it seems wholly separate from the trashy punk exploding from the album’s previous songs. As always though, Krakow and Plastic Crimewave Sound see fit to whip themselves into a furry for the enjoyment of their entranced collector fan base. (Dave Cantor) [plasticcrimewave.com](http://plasticcrimewave.com)

**ROBERT POLLARD**

The Crawling Distance CD – Guided By Voices Inc. If, for whatever reason, you happen to be surfing the Web site of music publisher BMI and you enter a search for Robert Pollard, you will find that the man has 1,162 songs registered in his name. That’s a four-digit number, people. How many of us have made 1,162 of anything? I’m not sure I have that many toenail clippings to my name. In any event, here are 10 more to add to that list. It’s the first Pollard album to be released in 2009, which technically differentiates it from the two or three others that are sure to come out in the next nine months, and the jams are about as good as you would expect them to be. One interesting thing about this record is the fact that some of these songs actually stretch past the three-minute mark, which is something of a novelty in the Pollard/Guided By Voices catalog. The guy likes to make his point with a couple hooks and get out of there. But between this, *Guided By Voices*, and Pollard’s latest side project Boston Spaceships, how much faux-British Invasion rock’n’roll do you really need? Unless you’re mainlining this shit directly into your veins in lieu of methadone, there’s no reason why you couldn’t just crank *Alien Lanes* or *Bee Thousand* one more time. That said, *The Crawling Distance* will probably still be remembered as one of the more listenable records to come out this year. (Matthew Van DeWitt) [robertpollard.net](http://robertpollard.net)

**THE POSTMARKS**

1-12: By-the-Numbers CD – Unfiltered / World’s Fair Label Group

The cover album is, sadly, often the last refuge of a band run out of ideas. For The Postmarks, however, a mere two-and-a-half albums into their young career (present company included), nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, *By-the-Numbers* is more of a breathing exercise for the band – a chance to let their proverbial hair down. The conceit here is a fairly clever one: a dozen songs, each revolving around its corresponding number within the album’s track list. The result of such a challenge is a rather diverse lineup of covered artists, from The Pointer Sisters to The Jesus and Mary Chain. On a whole, the band largely manages to transform each number into a Postmarks song, which often revolves around slowing down the tempo and quieting the instrumentation. The results are a bit mixed. In the case of “Three Little Birds,” much of the song’s original appeal is stripped away for the sake of minimalism. With “7-11,” Tim Yehezkely’s vocals inject the song with a charm and sorrow missing in the original Ramones’ version. *By-the-Numbers* isn’t always as musically explorative as one might hope from such a diverse collection of covers, but it certainly goes a ways toward expanding the band’s recorded repertoire. (Brian Heater) [thepostmarks.com](http://thepostmarks.com)

**PRODIGY**

Invaders Must Die CD – Take Me to the Hospital / Cooking Vinyl

*Invaders Must Die* is Prodigy’s fifth studio release and it finds them in good form after 18 years. The title track swoops in, announcing Prodigy’s intention to get you back out on the dance floor with a harder edge than they’ve ever had. “Omen” makes you duck in anticipation of things to come. “Thunder” features reggae-tinged singing over a hardcore techno riff, the lyrics stating, “I hear thunder but there’s no rain / This kind of thunder breaks walls and window