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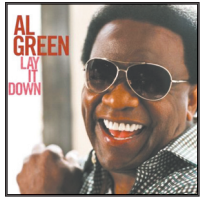
In Tune

The Daily News

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ON THE FENCE

With Jason Mraz, it's usually all or nothing as far as popularity is concerned, but his new CD could convert the doubters while taking time to grow on longtime fans



AL GREEN, "Lay It Down" (Blue Note) ☆☆☆½ — Closing in on his sixth decade in the music business, soul legend Al Green shows no signs of slowing down. Continuing his late-career resurgence with a third straight solid release for Blue Note, the 62-year-old Green's distinctive falsetto sounds the same as it did 30 years ago when he was churning out hits like "I'm Still in Love With You," "Tired of Being Alone" and "Let's Stay Together."

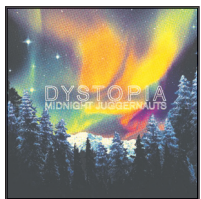
He's recruited modern R&B artists (Anthony Hamilton, Corrine Bailey Rae, John Legend) to join him on this 11-track collection of mostly outstanding tunes. The title track soars with Hamilton's help (as does "You've Got the Love I Need"), while the hauntingly beautiful accompaniment from Rae on "Take Your Time" elevates an otherwise ordinary tune. Surprisingly, Legend's contributions on "Stay With Me (By the Sea)" are nothing special, and the song is a bit of a letdown. But don't be fooled into thinking that Al Green no longer stands on his own musical feet. He's in peak form on "Just for Me" and "All I Need," and the fantastic disc closer "Standing in the Rain" will leave you clamoring for more. (JS)



ANGEL BAND, "With Roots & Wings" (Appleseed) ☆☆☆ — All the parts seem to be in place for the Angel Band. Featuring a trio of first-rate vocalists in Nancy Josephson, Jen Schonwald and Kathleen Weber, along with an impressive array backing musicians that includes the legendary David Bromberg, "With Roots & Wings" shaped up to be a winning album.

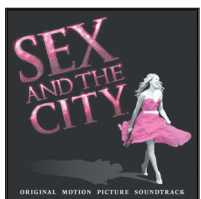
But while I enjoyed it to a certain extent, I can't help but think that it could have been — and maybe should have been — better. Though I can't put my finger on the problem, "With Roots & Wings" is one of those cases where the whole just isn't as good as the sum of its talented parts. There's plenty of harmonizing and ear-pleasing string music here, and Josephson's songwriting skills (she penned eight of the 13 tracks) are sharp. But it's the unexpected twists and turns that make the biggest — and best — impression. The Angels soar on the bluesy keeper "Drown in the Fountain of Good" and a straight-forward cover of "Angel of the Morning," a Chip Taylor tune that became a crossover hit for Juice Newton in the early '80s.

I wanted "With Roots & Wings" to be great, I really did. Here's hoping the ladies get over the hump on the next album. (JS)



MIDNIGHT JUGGERNAUTS, "Dystopia" (Astralwerks) ☆☆☆½ — Aussie electro-pop trio Midnight Juggernauts might be a (relative) household name in their homeland, but I'm not getting what all the fuss is about. "Dystopia" is an OK debut album, but at more than 54 minutes, it drones on w-a-a-a-y too long. As a result, the few enjoyable nuggets sprinkled into the 14-track mix get lost in the same-sounding shuffle.

On tunes such as "Into the Galaxy," "Road to Recovery" and "Tombstone," the Juggernauts hit their groove. While their sound isn't especially original (that's the case with most electronica artists, in my opinion), they at least make the occasional attempt to break up the monotony. The title track and "Twenty Thousand Leagues" are pretty good, too, but don't even bother with the Turkish Prison Remix bonus version of "Dystopia" that closes the record. You won't be missing much. But by then you'll probably have had all the Midnight Juggernauts that you can handle anyway. (JS)



VARIOUS ARTISTS, "Sex and the City: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack" (New Line) ☆☆☆½ — As if that recent 63-page spread (Are you kidding me? Sixty-three pages!) in Entertainment Weekly weren't enough, the "Sex and the City" promotional train keeps chugging along with this surprisingly good soundtrack.

It seems the good folks at New Line think we can't get enough of Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte. Maybe they're right.

Featuring such heavyweights as Fergie, Jennifer Hudson (who also acts in the film), Nina Simone, Al Green and Run-D.M.C., the record skirts multiple genres nicely. Lesser-known artists such as Morningwood, the Weepies, and Kaskadee add their unique sounds to the mix with varied results. Standout tracks include the Bird & the Bee's reading of the Bee Gees classic "How Deep Is Your Love," India.Arie's cover of Don Henley's "The Heart of the Matter" and Al Green being joined by Joss Stone for "How Can You Mend a Broken Heart." Hudson also scores with "All Dressed in Love," and Fergie is less annoying than usual on "Labels or Love."

Kaskadee's techno "I Like the Way" misses the mark, as does "It's Amazing" by Jem and "Auld Lang Syne" by Mairi Campbell and Dave Francis. Morningwood's "New York Girls" is OK, while the Weepies make an impression with "All This Beauty," and who can resist the Run-D.M.C./Aerosmith version of "Walk This Way"? (JS)

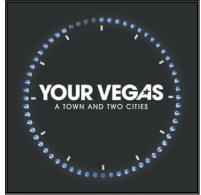


ERIC HUTCHINSON, "Sounds Like This" (Warner Bros.) ☆☆☆ — There's something to be said for persistency. Because for every overnight musical sensation, there are hundreds of artists like Eric Hutchinson who toil away in obscurity, refusing to give up on their dream.

"Sounds Like This" is the culmination of six years of hard work and countless obstacles. From trying to cut an album with an under-rehearsed collection of musicians, to watching his record sit on the shelf due to contractual problems, to having another label fold during the recording process, Hutchinson must have felt cursed.

Thanks goodness he stuck with it, because this excellent pop-rock record — think Ryan Montbleau mixed with a touch of G. Love & Special Sauce and a dash of Jason Mraz — was worth the wait. The 10 tunes that make up "Sounds Like This" are uniformly strong, with infectious toe-tappers such as "OK, It's Alright With Me," "Outside Villanova," "Oh!" and "All Over Now" perfect accompaniment for your next road trip.

After everything Hutchinson went through to get the album made, I hope "Sounds Like This" catches on with the listening public. He deserves it — and so does this record. (JS)



YOUR VEGAS, "A Town and Two Cities" (Universal Republic) ☆☆☆½ — Despite the band's name, alternative pop/rock quintet Your Vegas are the pride of Leeds in the United Kingdom. Frontman Coyle Girelli offers up a reasonable explanation for the misleading moniker. "It was one



JASON MRAZ, "We Sing, We Dance, We Steal Things" (Atlantic) ☆☆☆½ — If you gathered 100 people together and made them listen to Jason Mraz's first two studio albums, I'm willing to bet the split would be about 50-50 between those who loved "Waiting for My Rocket to Come" and "Mr. A-Z" and those who hated them. That's because the 30-year-old Virginian makes the kind of infectious pop-rock that will either have you bouncing along to the beat or make you want to jab hot poker in your eyes. It's pretty much all or nothing with this guy. I admit to being a fan, though I thought "Mr. A-Z" was a noticeable step down from his fantastic debut. And though I tend to enjoy it, I can see how Mraz's too-clever-by-half wordsmithing can be grating. With "We Sing, We Dance, We Steal Things," however, Mraz appears to have mellowed slightly

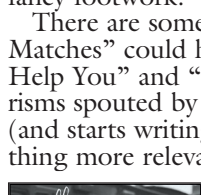
and matured greatly over the last three years.

There are moments of his trademark staccato vocal delivery in tunes such as "Make It Mine" and "The Dynamo of Volition," but Mraz shows he can play it straight on standouts "I'm Yours," "Lucky" (with Colbie Caillat) and "A Beautiful Mess." And he shows off his blue-eyed soul tenor on "I'm Yours" and "Butterfly."

Not everything works on this almost-great record. I expected a little more from "Details in the Fabric," a too-slow ballad featuring James Morrison, and the lyrics of "Love for a Child" aren't on par with the excellent country shuffle melody. "We Sing, We Dance, We Steal Things" is the type of record that could convert some of Mraz's naysayers, but it might take a few spins for longtime fans to come around. (Jeffrey Sisk)

of our first songs. 'Your Vegas' seemed to sum us up. It's about escaping to a different place, wherever that is." Your Vegas are the latest to capitalize on the retro sound of the 1980s, and "A Town and Two Cities" is a fun record from beginning to end. (It was quite fitting that the band toured with kindred spirits Duran Duran this spring, seeing how they obviously were influenced by that group's sound.)

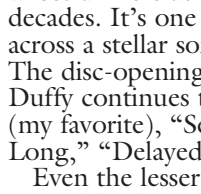
The record gets off to a fantastic start with a series of stellar tracks in "It Makes My Heart Break," "In My Head," "Birds of Paradise" and "Aurora." The momentum slows with ho-hum entries such as "Troubled Times" and "The Way the War Was Won" before bouncing back with keepers "Up Until the Lights Go Out" and "I Wish You Were Somewhere Else." (JS)



JULIANNE HOUGH, self-titled (Mercury Nashville) ☆☆☆ — Nineteen-year-old Julianne Hough deserves some serious kudos for her ability to multi-task. Apparently winning back-to-back titles on ABC's "Dancing With the Stars" (she led Apolo Anton Ohno and Helio Castroneves to victory) wasn't enough for the Utah teen, who shows off another set of skills on this impressive country-tiny debut.

In the vein of fellow blond ingenues Carrie Underwood and Miranda Lambert (though a notch below those bona fide stars in terms of quality), Hough draws her way through 11 enjoyable tunes. Tracks like disc opener "That Song in My Head," "My Hallelujah Song" and "You, You, You" seem destined for the radio and surely will please those who love Hough for her fancy footwork.

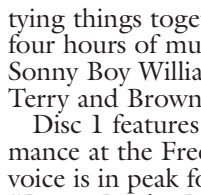
There are some stumbles along the way. "Hide Your Matches" could have been better, and songs such as "Help Me, Help You" and "Love Yourself" sound too much like aphorisms spouted by Dr. Phil. Perhaps as she grows older and wiser (and starts writing her own material), Hough will have something more relevant to sing about. (JS)



DUFFY, "Rockferry" (Mercury) ☆☆☆½ — With apologies to my fellow Yanks, Great Britain is where it's at for up-and-coming young female singer/songwriters. You can add Welsh-born Duffy to a growing list of standouts from across the pond that includes Amy Winehouse, Joss Stone, Kate Nash and Lily Allen. A throwback to the neo-soul sound of the 1960s — think Winhouse minus the tabloid drama and R-rated lyrics — the 23-year-old Duffy has crafted one of the year's best debuts.

Though everything on "Rockferry" is an original (Duffy cowrote all 10 tracks), they sound like they've been around for decades. It's one of those albums where you're sure to come across a stellar song even if you set your trusty iPod to shuffle. The disc-opening title track gets things off to a great start, and Duffy continues the winning tunes with "Warwick Avenue" (my favorite), "Serious," "Syrup & Honey," "Hanging on Too Long," "Delayed Devotion" and "Distant Dreamer."

Even the lesser tracks — "Stepping Stone," "Mercy" — are enjoyable, though they don't quite measure up to the rest of the collection. With "Rockferry," Duffy has set the bar very high. I can't wait to hear what she comes up with next. (JS)



VARIOUS ARTISTS, "Chris Barber Presents The Blues Legacy: Lost & Found Series Volumes 1-3" (Classic Studio T/MVD Audio) ☆☆☆½ — Fans of the blues should rush out and get this three-disc collection of live performances featuring some of the genre's greatest artists. With British jazz impresario Chris Barber and his band

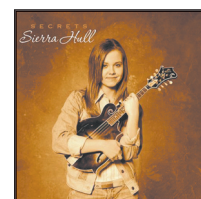
tying things together, there are 75 first-rate tracks and nearly four hours of music by legends such as Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Sonny Boy Williamson, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee.

Disc 1 features Sister Tharpe's gospel-heavy 1957 performance at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester, England. Her voice is in peak form on standout tracks like "Didn't It Rain," "Down By the Riverside" and "Every Time I Hear the Spirit." It also has Terry and McGhee working their way through songs such as "John Henry," "When the Saints Go Marching In," "Midnight Special" and "This Little Light of Mine" during a 1958 appearance at the same venue.

Disc 2 finds Terry and McGhee soaring on "Poor Man Blues" and "When Things Go Wrong" and Waters scoring with "Hoochie Coochie Man," "Baby Please Don't Do" and

"I Feel Like Going Home." Tunes by Champion Jack Dupree ("Mother-in-Law Blues") and Louis Jordan ("T'ain't Nobody's Business") round out the least impressive of the three CDs.

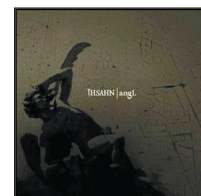
Disc 3 is stuffed with a whopping 29 tracks. Among the many highlights are Williamson's "C-Jam Blues," "Your Funeral, My Trial" and "Pontiac Blues"; Howlin' Wolf's "Dust My Broom" and "May I Have a Talk With You"; and Jimmy Witherspoon's "Everyday I Have the Blues" and "Goodbye, Goodbye, Goodbye." (JS)



SIERRA HULL, "Secrets" (Rounder) ☆☆☆ — It's no wonder that friend/mentor Alison Krauss is such a big fan of mandolin-pickin' child prodigy Sierra Hull. The 16-year-old Tennessean has the same ethereal singing voice and affinity for contemporary bluegrass as Krauss, and she harnesses all that talent on this solid, if not spectacular, debut.

"Secrets" showcases Hull's phenomenal musicianship and offers a glimpse, through enjoyable tracks such as instrumentals "Two Winding Rails" and "Hullarious," along with disc highlight "Pretend," her blossoming songwriting skills. As she gets older, I'm hoping she'll start including more of her own tunes on her records.

Other enjoyable songs include "Everybody's Somebody's Fool," "Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder" and "If You Can Tame My Heart." (JS)



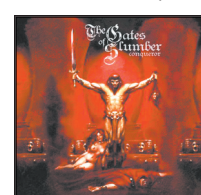
IHSAHN, "angL" (Candlelight) ☆☆☆ — Ihsahn's legend cannot be disputed. He led Norwegian black metal pioneers Emperor through a groundbreaking career, and now that his band is no more, he's become an accomplished, inspired solo artist.

"angL," his second under the Ihsahn moniker, is a combination of black metal, thrash, power, and furious prog, and it blows 2006's decent "The Adversary" into the stratosphere. In fact, it's one of the most forward-thinking, imaginative records released this year in any of the aforementioned subgenres, and it should bring him to the forefront of metal musicians who don't need to ask for respect, but automatically receive it.

The record kicks off with the vicious "Misanthrope," which is treated with Ihsahn's wickedly expert guitar skills, creaky growls and spooky synth, as he threatens (very convincingly, I might add), "This last meal, my righteous friend, I serve thee cold." "Malediction" is in the same vein with blinding-fast drums (courtesy of Asgeir Mickelson, formerly of Borknagar) and demonic synth, as is closer "Monolith," which builds out of a prog-jazz jam into a severe thunderstorm of death.

But Ihsahn brings more to the table than savagery, as he proves on "Scarab," which finds him crooning cleanly (and effectively) over acoustic guitar and piano. He proves it again on "Threnody," which sounds like Queensrÿche before they flopped and died, and the stunning "Unhealer," which is an unforgettable, slow-then-crushing duet with Opeht's Mikael Åkerfeldt (the mere thought of this is too much).

For any misguided miscreant who dares accuse metal musicians of lacking artistic merit, I believe Ihsahn would like to have a word with you. (Brian Krasman)



GATES OF SLUMBER, "Conqueror" (Profound Lore) ☆☆☆½ — Gates of Slumber are mighty for two reasons: Their third record contains the word "lair" in back-to-back song titles, and the dudes who make up the band look like they could have bodyslammed Andre the Giant when he was alive.

So basically, they're burly and gargantuan, and so is their metal, which calls back to the days of Black Sabbath, early Iron Maiden, St. Vitus and Cathedral, and is packed with fantasy themes and horrific reality, such as a look at genocide-ravaged Darfur in disc highlight "Children of Satan." While Gates are heavy and scary, they also are melodic and have a great grasp of keeping the lighter touches soft, the weightier ones massive as a three-headed beast breaking through a mountain, ready to devour an unsuspecting village below.

Frontman/guitarist Karl Simon has a steady, sometimes monotone wail, rarely ever screaming or growling, as he delivers meat-sliding-off-bone bashers "Trapped in a Web," speedy "The Machine," the slow-paced epic of a title track, and "To Kill and Be King." It just might be the freshest metal record you'll hear this year. (BK)