

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2008

Darkthrone’s 14th release as good as anything in catalog



DARKTHRONE, “Dark Thrones and Black Flags” (Peaceville) ☆☆☆ — Fenriz is the Ozzy Osbourne of black metal — a crazy old kook you can’t help but love. But unlike the “clown prince of darkness,” Fenriz’s artistic output hasn’t turned into runny drivel, and he doesn’t have an evil troll of a wife to make him

into a public fool.

On the 14th Darkthrone effort, Fenriz folds his crust punk into black metal lo-fi rumble on a record that’s just a damn good time. And you can tell from his light-hearted lyrical explanation in the liner notes, his random photos from woods excursions, and his page full of recommended other recordings you should peruse (no, seriously), he recorded with an ale and a smile. Hey, black metal doesn’t have to be all devil all the time.

As satisfying as anything in the Darkthrone catalog, Fenriz and Nocturno Culto hit the ground running on somewhat silly sounding but awesome “The Winds They Called the Dungeon Shaker” (complete with a stab at cartoon crooning), which crumbles into the Celtic Frost-style downtuned “Death of All Oaths,” power metal-fueled “Norway in September” and “Grizzly Trade,” and metal lifestyle salutes on “Hiking Metal Punks” and “Hanging Out in Haiger.” Easily one of the more accessible and lovable black metal outfits going, this record will be devoured by Darkthrone minions. *(Brian Krasman)*



AND YOU WILL KNOW US BY THE TRAIL OF DEAD, “Festival Thyme” (Richter Scale) ☆☆☆½ — OK, so their time on Interscope didn’t work out that well. But really, are you surprised? Corporate big wigs who can’t figure out a way to market a dramatic, propulsive art rock band? Unthinkable!

Trail of Dead also didn’t do themselves many favors after 2002’s “Source Tags and Codes,” putting out tepidly received “Worlds Apart” and “So Divided,” albums apparently only I liked, then fighting with their label and amongst themselves. But with the dust cleared, and the creative unit down to Conrad Keely and Jason Reece, it seems a nice time for a rebirth. This “Festival Thyme” EP seems to be just that.

There are traces of the sonic hugeness they tried to capture during their major-label jaunt, such as on the killer, wildly piano-pounded instrumental “The Betrayal of Roger Casement and the Irish Brigade” and the edited “Inland Sea,” but their bombast and power resurge on the gazy and punchy opener “Bells of Creation,” which starts off sounding like a Who volcanic eruption, and the title track, which gallops and soars. All of this paves the way for their next full-length, which should be duly anticipated when it drops on us come February. I can’t wait. *(BK)*



DODSFERD, “Death Set the Beginning of My Journey” (Moribund) ☆☆☆ — Wrath, the only member of black metal army Dodsferd, is one angry Greek. This isn’t anything new, really, as he’s always been wickedly cranky and willing to express his discomfort in as violent a way possible with his output. “Death Set” is no

different.

Combining Wrath’s tortured, cackled shrieks, far-off-in-the-distance howling, and militarily-drubbed, low-budget metal pounding, it creates nice fodder for those still wretching along with his last effort “Cursing Your Will to Live” and, like, he declares on this platter, promising, “The day you all will rot, I will bury my hate forever.” That’s also the song’s title. Wrath has no use for brevity (both in song length and title) as he proves when he’s twisting your skin on “Light Is Darker in This Swamp” and “Suicide Was Created By Your Incompetence,” which, of course, it was. Not exactly the feel-good record of the year, unless you’re on a stew of psychotropics. *(BK)*



CRYSTAL STILTS, “Alight of Night” (Slumberland) ☆☆☆ — They’ve become darlings of your oh-so-smart indie bloggers, proving again that I never should become one of those folks. This male counterpart to their more-awesome pals the Vivian Girls (seriously, same thing except less catchy) have blown up online, but

truth be told, their sound is a bit too mopey for me, and vocalist Brad Hargett feel less to me like Ian Curtis (to whom he’s constantly compared) and more like he’s going to nod off.

It’s probably just me, though, and I did find some value and enjoyment in their lo-fi psychedelics that borrow from ’60s garage rock and surf guitar, as well as Jesus and Mary Chain and Joy Division. Their moody rock works in doses, as it does on “The Dazzled,” wonderfully dark “Prismatic Room” and slightly folk-leaning “Shattered Shine” (the harmonica’s a nice touch), but spending long periods of time with “Alight of Night” keeps me reaching for something a tad more enthralling. *(BK)*



KEN BLOCK, “Drift” (Rock Ridge Music) ☆☆☆ — If something about Ken Block’s solo debut “Drift” sounds familiar, don’t be surprised. Block has spent the better part of two decades fronting Florida-based alt-rock outfit Sister Hazel and his slightly raspy tenor figures prominently on most of that band’s tunes.

The dozen songs that make up “Drift” don’t vary much from the Sister Hazel formula, though there’s a little more of a country vibe going on here. Block sounds great throughout and soars on tracks such as

“Blue to a Blind Man,” “I Don’t Mind,” “Better This Way” and “We Don’t Talk Anymore.” But being forced to shoulder all the singing and songwriting duties lead to a few clunkers (“It’s Alright,” “Completely Wasted”).

Block has no plans to quit his day job — nor should he — but everyone deserves to try something different every so often. *(Jeffrey Sisk)*



CLUTCH, “Full Fathom Five: Audio Field Recordings 2007-2008” (Weathermaker Music) ☆☆☆½ — Despite its rather unwieldy title, I was super excited when the latest live release from pedal-to-the-metal rockers Clutch came across my desk. Mainly because a handful of the tunes were recorded at a March

20 gig at Mr. Smalls in Millvale. Having been in attendance that night (it took a few weeks for my ears to stop ringing), I was anxious to hear how that gig sounded after some studio tweaking.

Oddly enough, there was a little too much polishing done in post-production for my liking — at least on the six tracks from the Mr. Smalls performance. Clutch’s renditions of “The Dragonfly,” “The Devil & Me,” “Ship of Gold” and “The Elephant Riders” are almost too clean and the audience sounds practically non-existent. I can assure you that wasn’t the case.

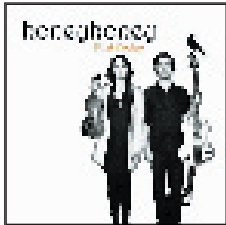
The remaining tracks are from December 2007 performances in Sydney, Australia, and Sayreville, N.J. The guys shine on “Animal Farm,” “Mr. Shiny Cadillacness” and “Electric Worry” (my all-time favorite Clutch tune), but “The Mob Goes Wild,” “The Yeti” and “10001110101” leave something to be desired. *(JS)*



CHRIS BROKAW, “Canaris” (self-released) ☆☆☆½ — It doesn’t take long to realize how good a guitarist New York native Chris Brokaw really is. “Canaris” is his fifth solo effort — he previously played in bands Come, Codeine and Pullman — and if you’re a fan of instrumental acoustic guitar, Brokaw figures to rock your

world. With six tracks clocking in at more than 42 minutes, however, you *really* have to like the guitar to make it through this record in one sitting.

The centerpieces of the collection are the fantastic “Drink the Poetry of Celtic Disciple” and the equally epic title track. Those two songs run about a half hour combined, but Brokaw does his best to change tempo and intensity to keep things fresh. He (mostly) succeeds. Ultimately, though, “Canaris” grows tedious (Brokaw could learn a thing or two from Rodrigo y Gabriela) and isn’t a record I expect to return to very often. *(JS)*



HONEYHONEY, “First Rodeo” (Universal Republic) ☆☆☆ — While the male half of the Honeyhoney duo, Ben Jaffe, is a talented guitarist and songwriter and no doubt an indispensable part of the group’s phenomenal full-length debut album, it’s vocalist Suzanne Santo who steals the show on “First Rodeo.” With the show on “First Rodeo.” With a voice as smooth and sweet as, well, honey, the actress-turned-singer carries the 11 mostly great tracks by effortlessly moving from pop to alt-country to jazz.

Whether Santo is channeling Amy Winehouse on “Bouncing Ball,” kicking the energy up a notch on personal favorite “Little Toy Gun,” finding her country twang on “Not for Long,” or pouring her heart into ballads such as “Sugarcane,” she excels at every turn. Additional keepers include the Delta blues-tinged “Come On Home,” the R-rated breakup lament “David” and the country rock delight “Give Yourself to Me.”

Honeyhoney are a band on the rise and I can’t wait to hear what Jaffe and Santo come up with next. *(JS)*

LUKE JACKSON, “... And Then Some” (Popsicle Recordings) ☆☆☆ — Life must be pretty good in Canada these days. Singer/songwriter Luke Jackson sure sounds that way on this enjoyable pop record that owes a great deal to the Beatles and the British Invasion. “... And Then Some” is a good, if not great, release that showcases Jackson’s estimable writing abilities (his voice is nothing special, though not offensive).

Jackson meanders his way through 10 pretty good tracks — most notably stellar disc opener “Come Tomorrow,” “Trouble,” “Goodbye London” and “Half a World Away” — but stumbles slightly on middling efforts such as “This Life,” “All I Can Do” and the silly instrumental “1970’s Kids TV Show Theme.” *(JS)*



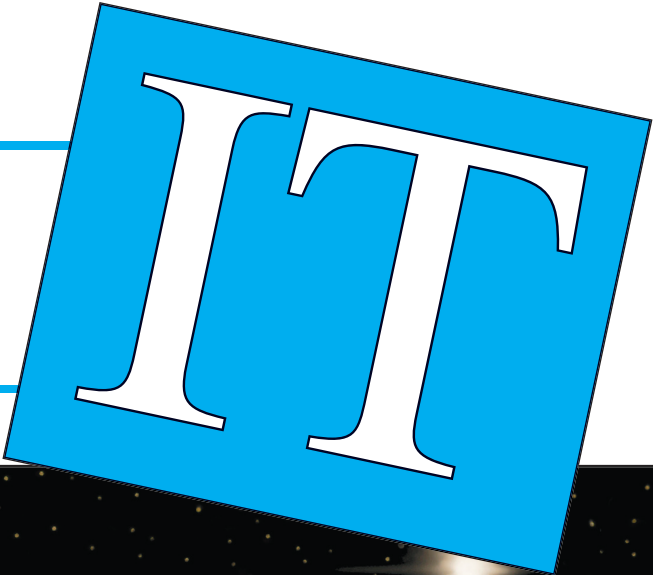
THE DODOS, “Visiter” (Wichita Recordings) ☆☆☆½ — People often ask me why I’m such a fan of indie rock. The short answer is because of innovative bands such as the Dodos. With the popular music scene dominated by marginally talented, cookie-cutter acts, it’s refreshing when an album such as “Visiter” finds its way to

me. This 14-track debut release bounces all over the musical map in the best possible way, with core members Meric Long and Logan Kroeber dabbling in rock, folk and country.

Most of “Visiter” is a delight, with the Dodos soaring on keepers “Walking,” “Red and Purple,” “Fools,” “Winter,” “Jodi,” “Ashley” and majestic set closer “God?” It’s not a perfect record, however, as some of the experiments (“Joe’s Waltz,” “The Season”) fail to register and/or outstay their welcome by lingering on and on and on.

Despite a misstep here or there, this is a record that deserves to be heard — and yet another example of why so many of today’s best musicians are toiling away just under the radar.

Thank goodness for that. *(JS)*



— Photo Courtesy of Rieder Photography
Alexandra Kochis portrays Marie in Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre’s annual presentation of “The Nutcracker.”

Kochis excited about role in PBT’s ‘The Nutcracker’

BY BONNIJEAN COONEY ADAMS
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Alexandra Kochis has danced practically every major female role in “The Nutcracker” during her professional career.

This season with Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, she’s achieved new status since her advancement to soloist from the corps de ballet.

Kochis is the dancer featured as Marie in all the promotional spots for the production.

She and her husband, principal dancer Christopher Budzynski, joined PBT for the 2006-2007 season from a previous stint with Boston Ballet, where they met.

When she spoke of the upcoming holiday tradition last week, assignments were being finalized, since many of the dancers perform several roles during the course of its run.

“I’ve been a doll, a shepherdess, an Arabian here, Marie and the Sugar Plum Fairy,” Kochis said.

When she and Budzynski first joined the company, they had to learn the nuances of PBT’s Artistic Director Terrence S. Orr’s interpretation of the ballet, which gives it a decidedly Pittsburgh spin.

Orr’s grand scale production was introduced in 2002. It featured winter scenes of old-time Pittsburgh and other familiar landmarks.

As the story begins, it’s Christmas Eve at the Stahlbaum family mansion where guests include such famous Pittsburgh figures from the past as Mr. and Mrs. Kaufmann and Mr. and Mrs. Heinz.

There are hints of Pittsburgh past in many scenes, such as the Kaufmann’s clock. Another PBT tradition is to invite area media and sports celebrities to take part in the Christmas party scene, where they mingle as guests.

The classic tale follows the story of an adolescent girl named Marie, who receives a nutcracker as a Christmas present from her godfather.

In a dream sequence, the nutcracker — really a handsome prince who has been put under a spell — comes alive. Marie and her Nutcracker Prince battle the dreaded Rat King and glide through a snowy forest where they encounter the handsome Snow King and beautiful Snow Queen, plus members of the corps de ballet as delicate Snowflakes.

As the ballet unfolds, Marie and the Nutcracker Prince arrive in the Land of Enchantment, where they are invited to a festival in their honor. It features other dancers in ethnic roles including Spanish, Arabian, Chinese and Russian.

“You try to keep it fresh,” Kochis said of performing some of the roles from year to year. It’s great that I get a chance to dance the part of Marie.

‘The Nutcracker’

When: Friday through Dec. 28

Where: Benedum Center

Tickets: \$20.50 to \$88.50

Info: 412-456-6666

There’s the dramatic aspect and you challenge yourself, making it a point to push yourself, seeing how you can improve your technique.”

Since “The Nutcracker” is such a familiar ballet, and Marie has such a major dance role throughout, Kochis said whoever dances the part has a challenge in connecting with the audience, “to make that connection of the emotions and feelings so that the ballet is relevant to them.”

Kochis said another thing nice about this year’s production is that she and Budzynski are partnered for many of the roles, such as the Snow Queen and King.

“Chris and I are dancing together in almost all of the partnering roles,” she said. “We are so comfortable with each other that I think we can bring that closeness to our performances.”

And although she and Budzynski had danced a version of “The Nutcracker” before coming to Pittsburgh, she said it was interesting to adapt to the particular nuances Orr added.

“We’d been to Mount Washington, but some of the other references we had to learn about,” she said.

For example, the showdrop where the performance begins is an artist’s rendering of an actual home that existed along Fifth Avenue in Shadyside. The house belonged, not to someone named Stahlbaum, but to F.W. McKee, a “lawyer and enterprising citizen.”

His father founded a Pittsburgh glass-manufacturing firm.

“When I first came to Pittsburgh, I immediately envisioned a ‘Nutcracker’ that incorporated Pittsburgh’s rich architecture and history,” Orr said.

The large clock at the top of the proscenium was inspired by the famous clock on the former Kaufmann’s department store in downtown Pittsburgh, a popular place for people to meet.

Kochis said it is becoming more popular for artistic directors to put their own city’s spin on “The Nutcracker.”

“I know a couple of other cities are picking up on that,” she said.

While Orr gave “The Nutcracker” a Pittsburgh touch, he also rejuvenated the second act with a circus-like atmosphere, including a big top with a ring-master and clowns, carousel horses, buzzing bumblebees and silly sheep.

That also provided an opportunity for children from Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre School to audition and participate in the company production.

Final placements for the students had not been announced as of press-time.