

the bohemian aesthetic

provocant, intelligent et gratuit—pas la revue de votre père



johnny cash • joanne cash • rufus harley • the stooges •
coko • elana james • falson & campion
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It couldn't have been coincidence that the same day's mail would bring me a new compilation of gospel material by **JOHNNY CASH** and a new album of—you're way ahead of me, aren't you?—gospel songs by the late singer's sister, **JOANNE CASH**.

Here Was A Man: The Ultimate Gospel Collection (Columbia/Legacy) surveys studio and live recordings of sacred repertoire from Johnny's Sun Records tenure, in 1957, to the twilight of his stay on Columbia, in '81. Alas, that means no inclusion of his weirdly rocking early '90s near-hit exposition of Revelation, "Goin' By The Book" (bigger as a music video than on commercial country radio), none of his '80s indie material, or tunes from Cash's revelatory late-period American Recordings series found among the 16 tracks on the *God* volume of 1998's *Love God Murder* box set.

Fortunately, that still means a wide breadth in the explicitly Christian expression on *Here*. Succinctly, however, wimpy male barbershop quartet-cum-Southern gospel background vocals were a distraction; wailing *female* bgv's, generally, a boon; help from wife June Carter Cash and The Statler Brothers definite blessings; aid from guest preachers about as much so. Cash solo or with his band: more often lustrous than not.

And it's not only The Man In You Know What Color's authoritative baritone that sells these songs. The sense of everyday reality he imbued to his own faith he also gave to the Bible personalities of whom he sings—folks who just happened to live lives in the direct path of Divine intersection and intervention. His voice couldn't help but lend gravitas to his singing, and whether you're open or dismissive to his musical evangelism and testifying, Johnny Cash did his thing with depth, weight, grace, and enough good humor for the music to stand on its own, regardless of his listener's metaphysical affiliation.

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Sister Joanne, to my slight surprise, is no latecoming rookie grabbing the gravy train from her older brother's demise. She's had a decades-spanning musical career of over 25 previous releases before giving the world *Gospel* (Acme Music Group/Mission House Music). And, perhaps, she'd be the first that she has to get over by means other than her brother Johnny's force.

Instead, she employs her sweet Kitty Wells-like pipes in service of numbers either a touch more doctrinal and/or sentimental than her celebrated sibling was inclined to include in *his* hymnodic repertoire. With arrangements heavy on steel guitar and fiddle, her sound evokes a slicked-up revision of post-Hank Williams, Sr., pre-countryopolitan Nashville, probably perfect for

positive/Christian country and Southern gospel radio programmers open to her giddy spiritual nutritiousness.

And Jo trading in on her bro's fame—by including a duet with him and donning a T-shirt streaked with the surname logo found on his American records—doesn't hurt her any.

To my surprise, I'd heard jazz bagpiper **RUFUS HARLEY** before getting *Courage: The Atlantic Recordings* (Rhino Handmade; limited pressing of 3000).

Harley cameoed on Laurie Anderson's first album, back in '82. It's been awhile since I've tossed the "O Superman" chanteuse/violinist's inaugural work onto my turntable, but reading the words 'jazz' and 'bagpipes' together, in the eMail I received about the double-CD collection of Harley's four '60s longplayers, left me intrigued.

Already a saxophonist with a thing for John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, and others of his contemporaneous, freer breed of jazzbos, Harley got turned onto Scotland's most notorious musical instrument export during a period of national mourning: he heard it played at John F. Kennedy's funeral service. Having found the sound he'd been hearing in his head, he threw that month's rent and his marriage into peril by purchasing his first set of bagpipes.

The sight of an African-American man playing this instrument—sometimes in full tartan garb—could have been perceived as a novelty. It had to have at least instigated a few double-takes. The sound, however, was a natural.

The unique sonority of the pipes went as well with Harley's more experimental explorations with Madagacarian harp as it did for his instrumental tributes to JFK, Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali or remakes of pieces by The Byrds, from *Mary Poppins*, or originating from the cannon of Antebellum spirituals. Though the sound of Harley's chosen ax was in keeping with the zeitgeist of new freedom and iconoclasm in jazz, it also gave him cachet for a few gameshow and talkshow appearances.

After his run of four albums on Atlantic, Harley wasn't very prolific. He died of prostate cancer last summer, but his jazzy piping deserves a hearing among seekers of the novel who enjoy the delight of finding something genuinely tuneful, too.

Aw, baby! **THE STOOGES** are back!

And the prospect of Iggy Pop again fronting the band that brought his "grand old man of spreading peanut butter on and cutting oneself, insulting one's hostile audience and masturbating onstage" fame and infamy doesn't thrill me just because I'd planned on lip-sync'ing "I Wanna Be Your Dog" (from their first album of nearly 40 years ago) on a local teen dance TV show to which I ended up not getting a ride...not that it was anywhere near 40 years ago that I intended to assail a bowling alley full of probable REO Speedwagon fans with a mimicked approximation of ferally passive-aggressive libido, mind you.

It's also because their first studio album since 1973, *The Weirdness* (Virgin; out in March), manages the nigh impossible. How does a band pick up its decades' old legacy like its next

collective, ragged heartbeat and not sound, in the least bit, dated? If they didn't, I probably wouldn't be writing about them now.

It must help oodles to have such an endearingly—if possibly still dangerously—misanthropic and quizzically conflicted frontman as Pop spewing venom, autobiography, and non sequitur observation with roughly 99% of the gusto he had on that *début* I almost excerpted for an independent UHF station, back when.

Original guitarist Ron Asheton matches Pop's outlandish passion and ennui with squall after squall that cements in place the missing link connecting psychedelic wah-wah noodling to shoegazer sonic obliteration, with the culmination of most every metal subgenre somewhere in the mix. Asheton's brother, Scott (another original Stooge), drums in such a way as to keep the proceedings danceable in unexpectedly sensible ways. Reprising their influences from skronky jazz and Motown, Steve MacKay's sax adds the occasional influx of fluidity and earthiness. Oh, Minutemen fans and anyone else appreciative of creatively economical bass playing will want to know, as well, of Mike Watts' presence as an *adopted* Stooge.

Am I going to slip this into my church coffeehouse's CD carousel? Not on your life. But am I encouraged by a group of guys mostly old enough to be my dad rocking with belligerence and warped vision harder than younger bucks half my—much less their—age? Did I purposefully want to freak the living crap out of the fans of arena rock gone pedestrian as a suburban crosswalk at Ledgeview Lanes?

Also making a comeback is someone whose current album I'd *gladly* put on as ambient tuneage for Holy Grounds (my church's coffeehouse; that pun wasn't my idea, OK?).

If you listened to R&B radio in the first half of the '90s, you might recall **COKO** from her gig as part of vocal trio SWV (short for Sisters With Voices). It's not just because she's now singing gospel that I've much love for her solo renaissance, *Grateful* (Light); it's because she's diverse as she wants to be.

Within the parameters of current radio-aspirant soul gospel, Coko's made an eclectic album that leaves one guessing just enough to keep it involving without being disjointed: a little early '70s Diana Ross flourish here, a gently propulsive contender for "unlikeliest club banger of the year" there, plenty-better-than-it-could-have-been multi-diva thrown down (with Faith Evans, Lil' Mo, and Fantasia Barrino) somewhere in the middle, and a convincing medium-simmer hard rocker to wrap it up.

SWV fans of old should have no difficulty getting behind Coko's current musical incarnation/s. The same creamy alto still anchors her more overtly spiritual musings. Her newfound gospel audience should appreciate her as a fresh voice singing scripturally solid, joyful songs over a broad creative pallet. Her simpler vocal approach contrasts pleasantly with the larynges of some of her prominent distaff soul gospel peers.

Here's hoping she doesn't go out with tracks when she tours behind this set, as a tight live band would make her sparkle all the more.

Just as Coko has gone solo from SWV, so has **ELANA JAMES**—from her years with The Hot Club Of Cowtown; and if the latter's first by her lonesome isn't the expansive hodgepodge of a musical journey the former's is, it's still a bold, fun restatement of the strengths honed in her prior gig.

And if the Django Reinhardt/Stefan Grappelli allusion of her old group's name wasn't evidence enough, small combo swing/jazz with Gypsy and country flair is James' strong suit. On her self-titled solo effort (Snarf; late February), she exhibits that suit half the time with originals and the other half with reinterpretations of work by, among others, past tour employer Bob Dylan and Duke Ellington. All that time, it's with her violin. (Note that, whatever country influences, she's not calling her instrument a 'fiddle'.)

A lass with James' class positioning her vocals somewhere 'twixt ingenue and coquette on the largely romantic material she assays, here, can call her instrument whatever she likes. She plays with elegant virtuosity and surrounds herself with a sextet that challenges her just a tad.

And lest anyone think she's grazing the same pasture she did in Cowtown, her songwriting suggests a crossover to a broader adult pop niche. Though not parroting the sort of *mélange* that's made Norah Jones a (coffee)household name, James sounds to be aiming for something complementary to the multi-platinum-selling Grammy darling. Nonetheless, James' own charms are abundant enough to get her over among many a discriminating aesthete. The one you're reading now, at least.

Ahem.

The techniques for male multiple orgasm described by **DR. BRANDON MAXWELL** in *The Maxwell Multiple Climax* (Dammit Jim Pictures) ought to provide some of you with pleasures that a celibate so-'n'-so such as me won't be having just now.

"What's so musical about *that*, Rake?," you might rightfully be asking. Well, apart from my having received the DVD from a publicist who sends me music, as well, it's the soundtrack that concerns me, of course. I'm not going to strain my eyes at either the dark-on-dark color scheme of the DVD case's back nor the tinier type in the disc's credits to tell you what co-ed couple's singing the end theme. That ditty and the music throughout, however come (though perhaps not as soon as before, *har har*) via the talents of **CHRIS FALSON** and **MICHAEL CAMPION**.

The composers seem to have drawn inspiration from the scores and few full-fledged songs heard in feature-length porn films of the '70s and early '80s. (Don't ask how I know, but I do.) All the more, however, they may be recalling the ambience accompanying Aaron Spelling's sitcom exploitation of that era's libidinal revolution. If you're thinking "Love American Style" and "The Love Boat", congratulate yourself on sharing the same wavelength of the guy whose musings you now read. If you do anything *other* than that, there's no need to tell me.

Those of you who, like me, have a funnymusic fixation will also note the animated segments by Spaff, the concern responsible for the lyrics to all those pop song parodies Robert Lund sings with such deadpan glee. 'Tis a bit of a shame Lund's not to be heard on this project, though there's no shortage of humor throughout the production.

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