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Scorpion

LITA FORD

PAUL GILBERT ♦ DARE ♦ FROST* ♦ JOE LYNN TURNER

pleasing, sometimes surprising, but still rarely invigorating.

Sophie Brownlee

CATE ROX
'MIND VS HEART'
(LimeLight)
MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

From Halestorm to The Pretty Reckless, Beth Hart to Grace Potter, and Within Temptation to Delain; there's never been a better time to be a female Rock musician. That said, young hopefuls will need to show something extra special to stand out from such an impressively diverse crowd. Enter Cate Rox, a German singer/song-writer whose genre-busting musical tapestry could well separate her from the pack.

'Mind Vs Heart' is an impressive debut from a songstress who already boasts a sharply defined sonic identity, with a prevailing sound of riff-driven Electro Rock in 'Flames' and the bubble-gum Pogo Punk of 'Let It Go' that recalls Republica. 'Magical Girl' channels Shirley Manson's seductive allure, whilst the title-track apes Garbage's penchant for darkly delicious Goth Pop bijous. From that base Rox spreads her eclectic wings further. The Grunge riff of 'Breaking The Surface' screams Hole, 'On My Mind' imagines Marina And The Diamonds covering PJ Harvey, the hazy vibe of 'In The Dark' is pure Mazzy Star whilst 'Keep Climbing' has renaissance flourishes that could well be Florence Welch fronting Blackmore's Night.

Drawing on a melting pot of seemingly disparate influences could have produced an unfocussed mess, but Rox's thematically cohesive storytelling creates a consistent mood that glues everything together. With a fondness for introspection, she pirouettes from vengeful to vulnerable, empowered to fragile, and optimistic to tortured in a complex emotional dance that's part angst-ridden, part cathartic. Her commanding and dexterous voice also provides a focal point that anchors the music. With a range that glides between devilish baritone and angelic choir girl she unfurls a treasure trove of deceptively infectious left field melodies. There are flaws, though, as her rhyming couplets are often too predictable, and over enunciating them makes for telegraphed and mechanical pay-offs. Others may find her emotionally wrought, brooding too bleak and self-indulgent.

For those who dig a little soul searching, 'Mind Vs Heart' is a densely detailed listen that reveals more with every spin. It's well-produced, superbly paced and heralds the arrival of a promising new talent. In fact, you could say Cate Rox isn't so much a name as a fitting description of the lady herself.

Simon Ramsay

CHALICE 'N' CROWN
'CONFESSIONS'
(Independent)
PROGRESSIVE

A band whose origins stretch back to 1992 can now proudly boast of "finally" producing their first album; progressing from a swords and sorcery, fantasy lyric-based band (how could they be anything else with their name) into one which has both feet firmly planted in the melodic Power Metal field, and one whose themes now lie in more contemporary issues and global topics.

There are plenty of Classic Rock, Prog Metal and darker Metal influences amongst this five-piece, who make an immediate mark with 'Fight'. Lulled in by a staggered and swaggering opening, it develops into a melodic showcase for the twin guitar pairing of Arnd Kohn and Tommi Korndorfer, all contained in a suitably stomping chorus and fist-clenching bravado. One thing which makes an immediate impact is the fact that the album sounds fabulous. It's really full and chunky, well-mixed and really does justice to the material – a pat on the back to Andre Hofmann! It soon becomes apparent that the general feel of the songs on the album is that they fit what might be termed "anthemic"; generously punctuated with Richie Sambora-styled guitar squeals, and probably reaching a peak with the sing-along chorus of 'Seven Sins', perhaps the album's "token lighter moment" with its stop-start rhythm, yet still what you'd label as infectious.

Not that CNC are one trick ponies; they are bold enough to let the songs run their course, be it three and a half minutes or into extended workouts. 'Confessions' is a seven minute plus journey through an atmospheric middle section with a protracted instrumental break, all combining to tick the Prog Metal box. 'Desert Rain' opens in more restrained fashion, before the more familiar dynamism kicks in and you're back in the comfortable Chalice 'N Crown zone. It has to be said that they have a knack for churning out songs

with seductive hooks and coating them with a Hard Rock glaze.

This is a band who have gone through their fair share of line-up changes and experimentation – even Female-Fronted at one stage – but have settled into a solid unit. While it might not be particularly unique, what they do is take the basic and do it well. 'Confessions' turns out to be an album which ticks the sonic appreciation box, and will have a real appeal to fans of Classic Hard Rock looking for someone new to come along and grace the genre.

Mike Ainscoe

CIRCA:
'VALLEY OF THE WINDMILL'
(Frontiers)
PROGRESSIVE

Billy Sherwood must write songs whilst sleeping! Joking aside, I can't figure out how he finds the time to record and release such a plethora of quality-laden albums. Over the past eight months Sherwood has released a well-received solo concept album, a live album with cohort Tony Kaye, played bass for Yes on their US and European tour, and now we have a new Circa: album – the man is a workaholic! 'Valley Of The Windmill' is the fourth album from Circa:, who were formed in 2007 and initially featured Sherwood, ex-Yes keyboardist Kaye, Yes drummer Alan White and guitarist Jimmy Haun. The band released albums and toured the US sporadically and with little publicity, hence they may be unknown to many of our readers.

Clocking in at fifty minutes, and containing only four tracks, '...Windmill' is a Prog fan's dream! Opener 'Silent Resolve' is almost fifteen minutes long, and begins with a haunting keyboard introduction before an Eastern sounding guitar and keyboard liven up the proceedings. The pounding bass lines are typically Chris Squire-like, and methinks that Sherwood supplies them, even though Rick Tierney is credited as the bass player (maybe he's going to play bass on live shows?). Kaye adds lots of Hammond Organ and Sherwood's vocals are layered with multi-harmonies. Sherwood also adds a couple of wonderful guitar solos and the song is very reminiscent of late eighties and nineties Yes.

'Empire Over' will have fans of Yes (who love the 'Topographic/Relayer' era) in raptures, as it is a little left field in places, but still manages to retain the Circa: sound with lots of harmonies and powerful drumming from Scott Connor. The bass lines are once again dominant throughout, and Sherwood adds another sublime guitar solo. At seven and a half minutes the title track is the shortest song on the album! It is a lighter number with lots of acoustic guitar and plenty of Hammond, and lovely Sherwood harmonies. Final track 'Our Place Under The Sun' is a nineteen minute epic; it's one of the most powerful tracks that Circa: have recorded, with trademark harmonies, different styles of guitar, and surprise(!)... more Hammond Organ.

If you enjoy all the different eras of Yes, including those that featured Sherwood and Kaye, then you will really dig 'Valley Of The Windmill'.

Az Chaudhry

CODA
'CODA'
(ZRecords)
HARD ROCK

Well, what a mighty mash up this is! Not only legendary vocalist Paul Sabu, but also stalwart of the British Rock scene Vince O'Reagan, late of Legion and many other projects and groups. Let's be frank here, I like both musicians (even if some would like to burn O'Reagan at the stake) and was looking forward to seeing what could be produced. The result? A resounding "nothing

special"... oh dear.

First up, the matter of Sabu's vocals should be addressed, because he doesn't sound all that good. Every song sounds like he's one note away from rupturing his vocal chords, and that once great voice now has absolutely nothing to make it stand out from any other gruff-voiced singer on the circuit. It's not terrible by any means, but it just doesn't soar, and as a result the songs don't either.

The songs themselves are a rather pedestrian bunch; the usual chest-beating Power Rock that O'Reagan specializes in, livened up at times by seriously widdly guitar. The production is a bit messy which doesn't help, but even so, there's nothing that especially stands out or sticks in your mind. It really is the guitar solos, such as the one in 'Tell Me Why' (probably the strongest track here) that are the only thing that makes the album come alive.

I'm loathed to pour any scorn on two such talented blokes, but Coda just doesn't work to any degree that justifies investment, emotionally or monetarily. In the end, it's a pretty run of the mill Hard Rock album that should really have been released on Zzzzzzzzzzz Records, not Z Records.

Alan Holloway

CRAZY LIXX
'SOUND OF THE LIVE MINORITY'
(Frontiers)
HARD ROCK

Here we have it, the first live album from Swedish Rockers Crazy Lixx, after four albums and a decade of performances. Vocalist Danny Rexon has called it a "milestone for every Rock band", and it's hard to disagree when this album sees the end of the band's current line-up, with the recorded show being guitarist Andreas Z Eriksson last, before leaving for Inglorious.

The album is a nice mix of hits and fan favourites. 'Rock And A Hard Place' kicks off in a rowdy Stadium Rock style with big sounds, plenty of punch and crowd contribution. Chris Laney mixed the album (Europe, Crashdiet) and has come up with a sound very true to CL's live shows, losing none of the intimacy or rawness that comes with a Hard Rock performance.

The key change is less than enjoyable in 'Lock Up Your Daughter' with Rexon's voice not at its best in the higher register on any of the tracks. Nevertheless, this is a minor point, and you can't fault the sheer fury with which Rexon dives into every note. There's plenty of clean, shiver-inducing guitar work on 'Blame It On Love', before we add further fuel to the fire heading into 'Sound Of The Loud Minority'.

There's something special about hearing a crowd on a live album; they bring a sense of atmosphere to tracks that are so often heard in clean-produced circumstances. This lot have certainly been treated to a riot of a show with little talking, big backing vocals and, on the album at least, a very balanced sound. Other highlights include a furious 'Riot Avenue' and 'My Medicine (R.O.C.K.)', with the bass rippling in the undergrowth and guitars flitting in and out effortlessly; there's also a tight, anthemic performance of 'Heroes Are Forever'. This is the only track with a drawn-out ending too – a minimum of these is always a positive!

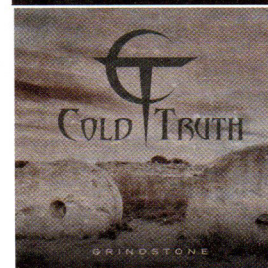
It's not a perfect show; there's huskiness that sounds like recorded backing vocals, and some timing issues, but these are bulldozed aside by the relentless energy of the songs, the seductively Sleazy sound, and the band's unflagging spirit simply oozing through their style of playing.

Finally, we have a release that showcases Crazy Lixx's talent for live performances, and one that brings together the best of their tracks into a high-octane, pulsing album.

Sophie Brownlee

COLD TRUTH – 'GRINDSTONE' (Blue Rose)

HARD ROCK



This is the third album from this four-piece Hard Rock outfit from Nashville, who have had the same line-up since 2000. It's a delightful slice of Southern Rock (a la Lynyrd Skynyrd or Black Stone Cherry) with influences of seventies Hard Rock, such as Free and Bad Company, and its roots, Memphis-style Blues. It's quality musicianship and heartfelt authentic Blues Rock, with many moments of sheer beauty; the vocals and guitar on 'Take Up' and 'Give It Time' being just some of many examples.

Songs like 'Livin' Hard, Livin' Free', 'Where The Music Takes Me', 'Hands On The Wheel', 'New Horizon' and 'The Long White Line' are American road music at its best, and makes you want to strap on a helmet and travel thousands of miles surrounded by beautiful wilderness. It's the sort of music to live a heroic life by... and should be a staple on any Rock band's tour bus; these guys are musician's musicians. 'Leave Your Leather On' is a modern kind of love song; filthy, but in a great way! Probably belonging in a strip club, it's the stuff of dreams (if you know what we mean). 'Free Man' is an anthem for freedom and what America stands for at its best.

Vocalist Thane Shearon has a voice that makes you think grand thoughts of man's struggle against the universe; such is its nobility and character. 'Last Man Alive' suggests this is not exactly unintentional and, as witnessed by title track 'Grindstone', this is workin' man's music. It's rebellious stance and sheer power are the reason many of us, with an individual frame of mind, were drawn to and continue to love Rock and Metal with a deep-lying passion. It's about the gut not the head; "baby if you don't feel it, you can never understand"... democratic and awe inspiring – the stuff of legends.

I love this album, and can happily say that you should do yourself a favour and buy it; you won't regret it. Enough to warm the cockles of a true music fan's heart... it doesn't come much better than this.

Dawn Osborne