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FIREWORKS

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WHAT'S YOUR SIGN?
Richie Kotzen delivers his 'Peace Sign' album



WIDE AWAKE
Skillet continue on their ascent to the top



WHIRLWIND
Transatlantic's new album will put you in a spin



METAMOPHOSIS
Papa Roach keep their evolution going strong



JEFF SCOTT SOTO ♦ GIANT ♦ STEVE OVERLAND

chorus doesn't really light the blue touch paper in the way I was expecting. It's decent enough but not a killer. The guitar solo is also very tame.

'All I Can Say' is a power ballad and takes the early honours for best track. There's a lovely melody and the vocal performance is excellent. The chorus is huge in a Jim Peterik style, which is no bad thing, it's real lighters in the air stuff.

'Right Here, Right Now' has a strong chorus and bridge, which is just as well because the verses are dull whilst the guitar solo in this instance is short but very sweet. 'Don't Give Up Your Dream' opens quietly in a Whitesnake style, with Hartmann doing a fair approximation of David Coverdale's phrasing and delivery. This comparison only intensifies when the tempo increases and there are some overt Coverdale-isms in evidence. 'Broken Down' has a decent riff but lacks a hook and the vocal delivery is a little shouty for my taste. This is followed by another power ballad, 'Don't Tell Me It's Over', and I suppose it says much that it's one of the highlights. This would be a big favourite as a closing track at a Rock Club for the lovers in attendance.

'Lost in Havanna (sic)' injects a different feel into the mix, having an almost modern Lynyrd Skynyrd style with plenty of energy and a catchy chorus. 'Brothers' opens slowly with Hartmann wailing with emotion before the drums kick in and start the track proper. Again, there are Whitesnake/Jorn Lande comparisons littered throughout the song to the extent that this track could have been lifted from a Jorn solo album, such is its style.

Closing the album is 'Forgotten Innocence', which is probably placed rather oddly at the end, particularly given the bombastic and epic nature of the preceding number as it's a laid back almost West Coast number in its style. It develops into an AOR number and turns out to be a fine song and worthy of placement nearer the top of the album rather than the end.

A good album with many pleasing moments, which has grown in my affections with repeated listens.

Gary Marshall

ROCK SUGAR – ‘RE-IMAGINATOR’ (*Independent*)

So what happens to your favourite hair bands when they find limited appeal for their wares in a more modern environment? They step back in time. Rock Sugar is a band, having been marooned on a desert island for twenty years with only their instruments and the tape collection of a 12 year old girl from 1989 to keep themselves company during their long struggle to survive. Needless to say once the rescue was executed they were itching to tell the world exactly what they had been up to for the past twenty years. 'Re Imaginator' is that album. The comeback album from the Sunset Strip's long lost and sadly missed sons Rock Sugar.

Now that's the story, do you believe it? No! Who would? Anything Jess Harnell, Alex Track and Chuck Duran (Loud And Clear) are involved in always has a story involved. Rock Sugar is a project that has been in the works for over two years. It is the amalgam of rock and pop, it should not work, but it does. It is witty, clever and above all extremely well executed offering the listener twists and turns that they do not expect and the piecing together of Metallica and Journey on 'Don't Stop The Sandman' (as seen played live by Loud and Clear at FFS) was the catalyst to continue doing what no one thought was possible. Taking songs by Queen, Metallica, Madonna, Journey, War, rant, Bryan Admas, Ozzy, Rick Springfield, Guns & Roses, The Eurythmics, Bon Jovi, Judas Priest and 10cc, to name a few, mixing, matching and re arranging same into cohesive songs is a challenge that one should not take unless you are either decidedly insane or so confident that it's so right that the entire world should hear it. Well I guess it's inevitable after spending 20 years marooned on an island with just one copy of Now 10 on tape that before the advent of remixes and sampling Rock Sugar thought they were on to something new and exciting, sadly that is not the case, however what Rock Sugar have come up with is far, far in excess of anything that has been done before. Black Sweden possibly started the trend with their version of Abba meets Metallica, Steel Panther are carrying it on after many years slugging it out as The Atomic Punks, Metal Shop and Metal School before finally being introduced to the world with their hugely successful 'Feel The Steel'. The main difference here is whilst Panther offer a mix and match of Hair band classics and new 'classics' such as 'Girl from Oklahoma' and 'Fat Girl' (truly hilarious and funnily enough great tunes), Rock Sugar deliver the good clean fun version of a bunch of classic tunes delivered in a way that no one thought possible.

Grab a listen to 'You Shook Me Like A Prayer' 'Heaven And Heaven', 'Voices In The Jungle' or the enormous 'Round and Separated'. It shouldn't work, but it does. They should be vilified, but it's impossible to. All thirteen tracks grab you and take you back to the eighties heyday and you will find yourself singing along effortlessly to Madonna (!), Janet Jackson, Eurythmics and Supertramp with equal fervour to the more familiar tracks by Ratt, Journey, War, rant, Bryan Adams. It's a marriage made in hell that completely defies logic and makes 'Re-Imaginator' a MUST HAVE for every rock fan. Not just the hardcore hair band fans but anyone who enjoys a party. This is a nonstop party CD begging to be played over and over. It deserves it, it's fun, enjoyable and most of all the musicianship to pull this off is something spectacular indeed. Rock Sugar just might be the world's best kept secret for the last twenty years, but as soon as you hear this album that will change in an instant. I defy you not to enjoy it.

Huge production, huge vocals, searing guitars and slamming drums make this an absolute indispensable piece of Pop/Rock. As the world's number 1 L&C fan boy it is with great pleasure I present you with Rock Sugar. Why? Because Pop Rocks!! Check out the web site at www.rockugarband.com

Kieran Dargan

SPIN GALLERY – ‘EMBRACE’ (*Frontiers*)

An ongoing collaboration between vocalist Kristoffer Lagerström and the somewhat prolific, ‘far too talented for his own good’ Tommy Denander, the project that would eventually emerge as Spin Gallery was originally conceived all the way back in ‘97. However, it wasn’t until a number of years later (early 2004 to be precise) that things finally came to fruition when debut offering ‘Standing Tall’ received the green light from the sadly missed Atenzia Records.

Proffering a bright and breezy mixture of traditional Westcoast/AOR mixed with more contemporary hi-tech pop rock – think Mr. Mister, A.C.T and Toto meets Pink Floyd, Peter Gabriel and Saga over a nicely chilled glass of Chablis (none of that Chardonnay muck around here thank you!) – ‘Standing Tall’ was a much needed breath of fresh air, a viable alternative to the then all too prolific Goth infused pop rock which was secreting itself everywhere you cared to look (and several you didn’t).

It’s taken them more than five years (five years in which Mr D has no doubt made his presence felt on more releases than you care to count), but Lagerström and Denander have finally gotten around to writing and recording a follow up, ‘Embrace’. And whilst the pair of them are now essentially Spin Gallery, a smattering of guest appearances from the likes of Robin Beck and Dan Reed (who provide lead vocals on ‘Just A Momentary Why’ and ‘You Do The Things You Do’ respectively), helps to give it a more rounded feeling.

In some respects I kinda miss the big harmonies they created last time out with the use of three separate vocalists – that’s not to say that Kristoffer and Tommy do a bad job between them you understand – but that minor quibble aside, the svelte mix of eclectic guitars, snappy hooks and crisp melody lines found on tracks like ‘Embrace’, ‘Stone By Stone’ and ‘Blood In My Veins’ makes for a great all-round listening experience.

Quirky?... hmm yeah maybe, but then again as a longstanding Saga fan, I always did like something a touch more left field. Classy and sophisticated AOR for the more discerning palate.

Dave Cockett

KARNATAKA – ‘THE GATHERING LIGHT’ (*www.karnataka.org.uk*)

Despite the rest of his band having departed for successful pastures new, Ian Jones has not only created a new Karnataka whose first album this is, but has also collaborated in new band Chasing The Monsoon (note the continuing fixation with the Indian sub-continent!) whose debut is scheduled to appear later in this year. The “new” Karnataka, meanwhile, features vocalist Lisa Fury, guitarist Enrico Pinna, keyboards from Gonzalo Carrera, Ian Harris (drums and percussion) along with Ian Jones himself, here contributing not only bass but also Taurus bass pedals plus some keyboards and guitars.

Two notable guest appearances are also a feature of ‘The Gathering Light’: Troy Donockley contributing some mesmerising passages across the album with his Uilleann pipes and providing a Celtic undercurrent to the album, while cellist Hugh McDowell has enriched the track ‘Forsaken’ with his iconic playing. A string quartet also appears on several of the tracks, adding to the rich tapestry and warmth of sound.

Former purchasers of Karnataka’s albums will be keen to know whether this new formation has continued the band’s previous sound and approach. My response is that whilst ‘The Gathering Light’ identifiably includes the original feel of the “old” Karnataka, this is a much more ambitious and progressive album. We are now faced with

material that is more ethereal and often fragile but also incorporating much more complex soundscapes and these have been carried to a sublime level of accomplishment across the eight tracks, three of which (‘Serpent And The Sea’, ‘Forsaken’ and the title track) are of epic proportions.

Unusually, the album starts with over ten minutes of instrumental music – brief introductory passage (including the first dose of Uilleann pipes) ‘The Calling’ subsiding before the rousing and insistent ‘State Of Grace’ envelops the listener with its beguiling charms and magnificent themes. Between them, they do - to an extent - create a bridge between the music of the old and new versions of the band, as immediately there is a more grandiose and bold statement, the keys of Gonzalo Carrera being central to the initial impact of the album.

The track suddenly finishes and when ‘Your World’ begins we are initially greeted by some unusual percussive and other instrumental sounds drawn from wide-ranging influences. It’s a rather off-beat number to begin with but soon settles into a more recognisable groove and Lisa Fury’s voice is heard for the first time. She has a clear and precise delivery and whilst there are some uncanny similarities to Rachel Cohen there are also elements that remind me very much of Jacqui McShee of Pentangle! There is a certain drama, even languid, quality to the song and one is easily seduced by its charms and nearly eight minutes elapse in what seems like half the time!

‘Moment In Time’ is a number that I could easily imagine the original Karnataka performing and Lisa Fury is featured in both single and multi-track modes, while Enrico Pinna contributes an emotional and heartfelt solo before another piece of magic from Troy Donockley arrives. This is another number in which the layers of sound are wonderful-ly and effectively balanced...As this fades it is segued into the rather dreamy and ethereal opening to ‘Serpent And The Sea’ that is suddenly punctuated by keyboards springing the song into life. Lisa’s multi-tracked, soaring vocals create an atmospheric mood against often complex rhythms and layers of instrumentation. There are some tremendous solos and ten minutes pass apparently all too effortlessly! ‘Forsaken’ is an absolute juggernaut, the song bookending a lengthy instrumental bridge that wends its way across another complex instrumental landscape that will, I am sure, have lovers of traditional prog rock wetting themselves with delight! ‘Tide To Fall’ is the most concise song on the album and is a beautifully dramatic number that once again harkens back to the best material from the earlier version of the band. Finally, Uilleann pipes help to usher in the 14-minute title track – as entrancing and amazingly hypnotic piece of progressive music as I have heard in a long time.

The “new” Karnataka has produced an exceptional debut album, some of the numbers revealing their charms instantly whilst other take repeated listens to tease out all of the nuances and delights. This is in no small part due to the complexity of many of the arrangements and the intertwining of all the myriad elements. No wonder it has taken so long to complete! My only criticism (and regular readers will know it is my bête-noir) concerns the fading out of lengthy tracks. Tracks of epic proportion need a definitive ending in my view and should not merely fade away! Nevertheless, this is a magnificent return, and so very much better than one might have dared to expect after all this time!

Paul Jerome Smith

OHMPHREY – ‘OHMPHREY’ (*Magna Carta*)

I suppose the band’s name was a given when you take three members of Umphrey’s McGee and two from OHM and throw them together to form an improvisation-based Progressive Rock ensemble. They’re not unlike Liquid Tension Experiment in style, the big difference from my perspective being that LTE create strong melodies whereas Ohmphrey rather overdo the widdly stuff, which had the effect of making me lose interest quite quickly. It’s not easy to listen to when they go off into the freeform style without a decent melody to underpin the playing.

Opening track, ‘Someone Said You Were Dead’ is a case in point as it starts and ends very nicely but the bit in the middle just sounds like guitarist Chris Poland showing off and playing a different track to the rest of the band. ‘The Girl From Chi Town’ has a laid back and pleasant opening but ultimately lacks feeling, although technically it sounds amazing. ‘Denny’s By The Jail’ features some lovely Stanley Clarke style bass going on, which is spoiled by the widdliness that takes over proceedings.

Tracks four and five are the highlights with the former (‘Ice Cream’) having a lovely Jazz bass motif and a short but sweet keyboard solo, whilst the latter, (‘Lake Shore Drive’) has a delightful piano refrain. This is the most straight forward track on offer and is all the better for that. It goes a bit over the top towards the end but retains enough melody to hold it all together. After that they return to type with my notes for the last three tracks having comments such as “not very tuneful, hit the skip button”, “meanders, dull” and “tedious”. I think this is one for those who want to hear fast fingers over the fretboard.

Gary Marshall

RICK SPRINGFIELD / JEFF SILVERMAN – ‘FROM THE VAULTS’ (*Frontiers*)

Veteran rocker and consummate songwriter Rick Springfield is revered throughout the melodic rock world for AOR gems like ‘Living In Oz’, ‘Rock Of Life’ and last year’s excellent ‘Venus In Overdrive’, amongst others. Similarly, anyone intimately familiar with his work will know the name of Jeff Silverman, the ex-guitarist in Springfield’s first solo band who co-wrote many songs with him in a long period of collaboration. As the title suggests, this is a collection of some of their work together between 1986 and 1999, and whilst a few of these tunes will be familiar from

BRIAN HOWE – ‘CIRCUS BAR’ (*Frontiers*)



I make no apologies for admitting my preference for the Brian Howe led Bad Company ever since I caught a dual headline show with the Damn Yankee’s in the States many moons ago. It’s easy to forget how successful this version of the line up was and how much of a distinctive voice Brian has. I never thought the man got the acclaim he deserved, maybe due to having replaced the legendary Paul Rodgers, a situation Steve Augeri also suffered during his stint in Journey.

Anyway, onto the CD itself, the opening track ‘I’m Back’ clearly ticks all of the right boxes for melodic rock fans and it’s amazing that the man has lost none of the youthfulness in his voice, the tempo is certainly a gear up on his more laid back Bad Company material and most of the CD follows

in this vein. At times you’re not sure if you’re listening to something that John Waite might have recorded with the infectious ‘Feels Like I’m Coming Home’ and it shows the many moods that the mans’ voice has on offer here.

It’s not until we get to ‘If You Want Trouble’ with its mean vocal and Foreigner meets Bad Company guitar work that we are on more familiar Brian Howe territory, and to be honest I could have done with a little more of this kind of material as I think it suits his voice better. Strangely the likes of ‘Could Have Been You’ or ‘There’s This Girl’ would not be out of place in a teen film soundtrack with its bouncy pop rock beat. Yeah, I know how that sounds but believe me it actually works here! The songs really get under your skin after a few plays and I feel the variety of material is superior to his ‘Touch’ release of some years back, which I found a little on the soft rock side for my liking.

I’m not always a fan of acoustic pieces but when the lyrics are this heartfelt you can’t help but get caught up in the mood of a song like ‘Flying’, one of the lighter moments on this release. Legendary Canadian guitarist Pat Travers guests on ‘My Town’, which is a nice touch as he puts his stamp on the song very nicely indeed while keeping with the general feel of the album.

When I noticed that Brian had included two newly recorded remakes of his Bad Company hits I was dubious to say the least. ‘How About That’ does not stray too far from the original and retains all of its charms but ‘Holy Water’ takes on a whole new persona using only Brian’s voice and a piano. Suddenly the song’s hard rock leanings transform into something a little more spiritual and the emotion of the song is given a whole new life of its own.

In all, this is a great slice of melodic rock and should be one of Frontiers big sellers if there is any justice in this world.

Ray Paul

the completely different versions that appeared on Rick’s albums, the lions share will be new to all but the most devoted of fans.

The hi-tech AOR period of Rick’s career is exactly where most of these songs lie, but with little in the way of the big guitars and thumping drums that hallmark most of his best work. In a way some of these songs sound like works in progress, with a processed drum and bass sound and most of the melodies mapped out on synths, but still with the clever arrangements, complex percussive rhythms and dramatic chord changes that identify their makers. Of course some of this wouldn’t work if the songs weren’t great to start with, but thankfully they are.

For instance, ‘Dancin’ On The Edge Of The World’ is an intense aural experience with all the trademark melodies and vocal angst of a man who knows how to construct an emotional song. The catchy pop-rockers ‘Why Don’t You Dance’, ‘Hey Eileen’ or ‘You Write The Book’ are all instantly familiar even though you haven’t heard these particular songs before. For me the two absolute gems are the moody ‘Love Reciever’ and the long overdue release of ‘Right Planet, Wrong World’, where melodic songwriting meets something that little bit more diverse and interesting. The only ones that don’t really do much for me are the funky ‘Monkey’ (I’m a poet...) and the soppy ballad ‘Woman II’, which is actually nothing like the song that was it’s precursor.

Of the ones that the devout Springfield fans will know already, ‘Dream In Colour (Demo)’ couldn’t possibly challenge the finished version from ‘Rock Of Life’ but still has plenty of layers, and the excellent ballad ‘Somewhere’ is no better or worse than the Sahara Snow rendition, just different. Similarly the quickfire clever lyrics of ‘My Depression’ overlap some quirky instrumentation that was stripped from it on the ‘Shock/Denial/Anger/Acceptance’ version, and for what it’s worth I actually prefer the versions of ‘Religion Of The Heart’ and the brilliant ‘In Veronica’s Head’ to the ones that made ‘Karma’.

There are some great songs here and some of Rick’s most raw vocal performances are worth the price of this disc alone, and if at times the songs seem to lack something (guitars mostly!), it’s still a very worthwhile addition to any fans’ collection.

Phil Ashcroft

JAMIE MALLENDER – ‘RETURN TO BASS’ (*Independent*)

Having played bass with former Sabbath front man Tony Martin for the past few years, amongst other things, Jamie Mallernder releases his first solo album ‘Return to Bass’. This instrumental album features Jamie exclusively and is something which I would probably recommend for connoisseurs and musos rather than the man on the street. That’s in no way a criticism, more of a reflection on the standard of playing and style of music.

Coming from such a hard rock background (Bailey’s Comet, the Tony Martin Band and Zal Cleminson’s Oskura) you would perhaps expect an album from Jamie to be of this genre – not so. The album is a magnificent mix of jazz, rock, blues and all points in between. I was reminded at times of Stanley Clarke – one of my first bass loves and a very noticeable influence of Jamie’s.

Apparently, the album was a way of Mallernder channelling his frustration after the US tour he was scheduled to go on with Tony Martin was cancelled only hours before he was due to leave for the airport, leaving him with no income and no work. His energy wasn’t wasted. High points of the album for me are ‘The Bass Player/Answers Back’, which has a Zappa-esque feel in parts, but then almost Jethro Tull-ish in others, and the amazing ‘Captain Blake Versus the Lion’, which is old-school prog with plenty of keyboard wizardry.

This eclectic mix of styles is an excellent showcase for Mallernder’s talents, but even though he’s shunned commerciality with this release, I hope sales of this little gem will spur him on to bigger and better things.

Sue Ashcroft

DAWN OF DESTINY – ‘HUMAN FRAGILITY’ (*Shark Records*)

Coming together in Bochum Germany, Dawn of Destiny have kept themselves extremely busy since signing with Shark Records. Debut album ‘Begins’ was released in 2007 and quickly followed up with ‘Rebellion In Heaven’ one year later. Now a further twelve months down the line and quite amazingly album number three, ‘Human Fragility’ is upon us.

Style wise Dawn Of Destiny are squarely in the middle of the current female fronted symphonic power metal category that right now seems to throw up countless releases on an almost monthly basis. As you would expect, big meaty riffs, atmospheric keyboard passages and sryrupy sweet vocals abound right through the whole disc. To be fair Dawn Of Destiny do try to add the odd little twist and turn in their approach, sometimes it works, sometimes it’s not quite so effective. The short, creaky, rain sodden intro to the album’s title track sounds like it belongs in Vangelis’ ‘Blade Runner’ soundtrack, especially when the electronic ‘cars’ speed by and throughout the beautifully paced slow/fast sections of the song that intro is convincingly worked into the rest of the song. It’s an excellent little hook that keeps your attention, however when a similar thing is tried on ‘Ten Plagues Of Egypt’, the laboured Middle Eastern guitar and keyboard theme feel forced and a little contrived and the male growled vocals are cumbersome. It is also in these mid paced tracks that the production of Jens Faber (who plays bass and writes all the songs) lacks a little subtlety. Both Tanja Maul’s vocals and Patrick Klose’s drums are pushed too far out in front of the guitars, the pair are extremely proficient at in their chosen fields, however in these unfavourable surroundings, Klose’s cymbals dominate proceedings and Maul’s otherwise faultless voice feels fragile and exposed. Elsewhere Maul is a rock that Dawn Of Destiny leans on, her performance on ‘Dying Alone’ places her in the same category as the genres best performers and the arrangements and harmonies also are impressive.

Musically it’s the really big riffs that Dawn Of Destiny really thrive on. The almost Machine Head chugga chugga of ‘Unborn Child’ is a tremendous piece of guitar work from Veith Offenbacher who also shines on the Halloween like ‘Unchained Someday’. Dirk Rackiewicz on keyboards makes his presence felt throughout the album, together with Offenbacher they do make a tight, focused pairing and when they both spark off each other’s input then the results show ‘Human Fragility’ at it’s best.

Whilst Dawn of Destiny have improved steadily there is still work to be done to make their music really stand out from the pack and while ‘Human Fragility’ does have many moments worth revisiting, the overall impression is that most of this has been done before. If this genre of music is your main focus, then there’s much to please you here, and even for those with a passing interest there’s much to enjoy, however overall more innovation is needed to make a lasting impression.

Steven Reid

ROBIN TROWER - ‘WHAT LIES BENEATH’ (*Freeworld I Floating World Records Ltd*)

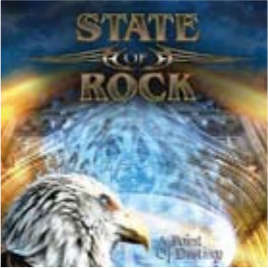
I was quite surprised to find a new album by Robin Trower in my pile for review. I had quite lost track of this remarkable blues/rock guitarist, having been a fan of his early work with Procol Harum (the left after 1971’s ‘Broken Barricades’) and also of his burgeoning solo career (and particularly 1974’s ‘Bridge Of Sighs’) although his vocal prowess never attained the dizzy heights of his individuality and style with his signature Fender Stratocaster.

So, I found myself studying his discography and was amazed to find no fewer than 23 albums by the Robin Trower Band prior to the one now under consideration plus three with the Brian Ferry Band, and four with Jack Bruce including one released in 2008 (‘Seven Moons’) that I am clearly going to have to investigate. He even returned to Procol Harum when they reformed after a lengthy hiatus in the early 90’s for the album ‘The Prodigal Stranger’ I have a lot of catching up to do, especially if any of them are as musically sublime as ‘What Lies Beneath’.

The album begins with the wonderfully beguiling instrumental ‘Wish You Were Mine’, Trower’s deft touches and soaring solos counterpointed by the underlying platform from the band’s rhythm section and the sublime strings of Andrew Haveron and Claire Hinton. It is an instant classic, mark my words! Trower has long been lauded with the epithet of “the White Jimi Hendrix” and one needs go no further than the opening bars of ‘What Lies Beneath’ to hear the recodence of this! It is a chunky blues-tinged number in the Hendrix tradition but with sleazy vocals that brought home to me how much the vocal stylings of Mark Knopfler and Robin Trower have originated out of the same box! A two-part song ‘As You Watch Each City Fall’ evokes an impression that is in equal proportions introspective Hendrix and Peter Green-era Fleetwood Mac, the second part of which is an instrumental jam that briefly revisits some of the themes of the lyrical first part. ‘Freefall’ is a rather funky little number with a wonderful solo that brings the song to an interesting conclusion. Then it’s straight into another of the highlights of the album: the slow blues ballad ‘Once The Spell Is Broken’. It’s magnificent, another instant classic, and even though there will be those who would argue that a different voice might have elevated the performance onto an even higher plane, for me it’s just right in a spine-tingling way!!

‘Sleeping On The Moon’ is signature Robin Trower – earthy and bluesy, whilst instrumental ‘Time And Emotion’

STATE OF ROCK – ‘A POINT OF DESTINY’ (*Metal Heaven*)



State Of Rock may be a new name on the scene but I’m sure some of you will be familiar with the past achievements of this German/UK band’s members. The press release sums it up succinctly when it calls State Of Rock 75% Frontline + 25% Shy, as that’s exactly what this is. Former Frontline members Robby Böbel (guitar), Rami Ali (drums) and Hutch Bauer (bass) have teamed up with Shy/TNT singer Tony Mills to make an album of powerful hard rock that should appeal to fans of both bands and other German acts like Evidence One (another Böbel connection) and Jaded Heart.

Firstly I find it odd that no keyboard player is credited on the album as there’s quite a heavy keyboard sound alongside the powerful layered guitars, but there’s no denying

that this is much closer to hard rock than the AOR of Frontline or Shy, even though Tony’s vocal melodies are so distinctive that he makes almost everything he sings on sound like Shy. If I have a problem with this album it’s the similarity of many of the songs, although the fact that they’re good songs will probably make you overlook that fact. As I said before, there’s also a similarity to the Michael Bormann fronted Jaded Heart, with big hooks and choruses on the upbeat ‘Black And Blue’, ‘Heartless Dreamer’ and ‘Freedom’, each one with big dramatic chord changes and Tony’s soaring voice. The thundering guitar sounds make ‘Count Me Out’ and ‘Hanging In The Balance’ instantly appealing, and the likes of ‘Friction’ and ‘Somewhere’ end the album on great riffs and choruses you can’t get out of your head.

It’s hard to pick favourites because the standard is pretty constant throughout, but apart from the slightly more laid back ‘Don’t Make Me Cry’ (on which you can play spot the lyric that Tony’s used before!) it’s a solid hard rock record that’s only a tiny step away from being melodic metal. There is however one tiny part of this CD that I didn’t enjoy, and with repeated plays it just seems worse. Just before the guitar solo in the title track Mills states flatly “This is the guitar solo!” Why he did this I’ve no idea, but for me it’s an unintentional comedy moment that I didn’t need.

Both State Of Rock and their record label are at pains to point out that this is a real band and not just a one-off project, which makes ‘A Point Of Destiny’ a strong starting point for what could be a good career. It’s a good solid album and a great foundation to build on.

Phil Ashcroft

emphasises Roger Cotton’s organ in counterpoint to Trower’s insistent guitar chords and stabbing solos. ‘Skin And Bone’ is another solid – but rather unremarkable - song, whilst ‘Buffalo Blues’ - the third instrumental here - is definitely one for Trower connoisseurs: a mid-tempo blues featuring a solid combo performance for Trower to extemporise against. ‘Find A Place’ is a splendid song so close out the album. Dissimilar from anything else here, it is a slow, rather wistful and introspective number and has a faded conclusion that for once I think actually works really well.

I have found ‘What Lies Beneath’ to be quite a revelation, and I am sure there will be more than a few of you reading this for whom it could well create a similar impression.

Paul Jerome Smith

ORPHEUS – ‘ORPHEUS’ (*Sidehorn Records*)

What we have here is a Norwegian female-fronted Heavy Metal band. They take their name from an important figure from Greek Mythology, known for his music and singing. Orpheus was also one of the handful of heroes to visit the Underworld and return. Shame then he couldn’t have took this album with him and left it down there! Harsh maybe, but even after repeated listens to this CD I just can’t find anything to get excited about.

The dirge-like opening to first track ‘Fuck Me Over’ doesn’t help things. I always think an album opener should grab you and hook you in, but this is just dull and uninspiring. It’s dominated by a morose sounding riff and slow crawling beat, and when Ingrid Galadriel’s vocals come in they don’t improve things. I know this is Heavy Metal so I’m not expecting the silky tones of Steve Perry or Paul Rodgers etc, but this just isn’t good. After about four minutes the tempo picks up but still the vocals are a weak point, and I find myself eagerly awaiting the end of the track. Track 2 ‘Constructing’ is a more uptempo traditional Metal number, but average at best, and again it’s the vocals that really let things down. And it’s the same thing through the rest of the CD, average songs with no real attraction, and vocals that just aren’t good. The pounding ‘Bloodflow’ does demonstrate some potential towards the end of the album, but ‘Peepin’ Tom’ is a return to the dirge sound, and ‘Mr. Manipulative’ is just awful.

On the plus side, guitarists Kristian Drivenes and Sivert Skaaren do weigh in with some decent Iron Maiden style solos, but if that’s what you desire then you might as well just go and listen to Iron Maiden because at least you’ll get decent songs. Sorry.

Ant Heeks

EPICA – ‘DESIGN YOUR UNIVERSE’ (*Nuclear Blast*)

I have to confess that the first thing I found attractive about Epica was lead vocalist Simone Simons. Stunning in every sense of the word and blessed with the voice of an angel. Hard to believe that 5 albums into the band’s career she is still only 24 years old! ‘The Divine Conspiracy’ (2007) saw Epica build on the foundations laid by both ‘The Phantom Agony’ and ‘Consign To Oblivion’ and takes things to a whole new ‘EPIC’ level. Everything came across as bigger and bolder, overly ambitious in some respects, but hardly lacking in terms of quality and desire. If anything the scale of ‘Design.....’ eclipses even ‘TDC’ and I truly believe the kitchen sink was a last minute inclusion. Drummer Arien Van Weesenbeek is now a full time member of the band and original guitarist Ad Sluijter has been replaced by Isaac Delahaye from God Dethroned.

Though rejuvenation was never a necessity Weesenbeek’s powerful playing and Delahaye’s six string skills, coupled with his writing abilities, have certainly added an extra dimension to Epica’s sound. Main songwriter Mark Jansen seems to have tapped into a rich vein of creativity and the structural blueprint of ‘TDC’ has been utilised and progressed without the material becoming repetitive. Following a brief instrumental introduction ‘Resign To Surrender’ rampages from the speakers, running the whole gamut of musical emotions and pretty much summarising the whole CD in just over six minutes. The following 70 minutes flow naturally from one track to another and the isolation of individual songs would, in some ways, detract from the album as a whole. Sweeping orchestral passages coupled with uncompromisingly heavy & brutal riffs and double kick drums give way to sublime subtlety and moments of utter serenity whilst giving life to some diverse moods and a myriad of musical styles. Simone’s breathtaking vocals are, as ever, a revelation, and though still contrasted by Jansen’s guttural expressions she seems to dominate the material with greater effect. Though Mark Jansen’s grunts and screams have always been an Epica feature, and at times proved a distraction from the narrative, they seem to have developed a more melodic identity and now actually enhance the songs, complementing Simone as opposed to competing with her.

‘Unleashed’, ‘Martyr Of The Free Word’ and ‘Burn To A Cinder’ are all examples of insane melodies and kaleidoscopes of intensely dramatic musical visions. The hooks are instantly memorable and have more definition than on previous releases. Delahaye certainly seems to have given the guitars more bite, riffs crushing you with their vehement intent and the inclusion of several guitar solos only increases the overall appeal. The mesmerizing beauty of ‘Tides Of Time’ is a Simons tour de force and something of a calm between the storms. Though essentially a mezzo-soprano her range defies these restrictive descriptions and allows her the opportunity to really express herself. Delahaye adds another brief but melodic solo and then the pace picks up again with the breakneck ‘Deconstruct’. ‘White Waters’ features a spellbinding duet with Sonata Arctica’s Tony Kakko and provides more respite before the epic scope and grandiose arrangements of the title track brings things to a close.

Uniquely challenging, artistically intelligent and bridging a whole host of styles, ‘Design Your Universe’ will reward those of an open-minded musical mentality, but those of a nervous AOR disposition need investigate no further. As with all Nuclear Blast releases the packaging and band photography are first class and another incentive to buy.

Dave Bott

actually sounds pretty good throughout and seems to have ditched the annoying squeals, in fact he sounds better here than most of his contemporaries do these days, helped no doubt by the fact that his vocals were recorded by Paul Shortino and the album was produced by Pat Regan.

It's not all good news though, the likes of 'The Devil May Care' and 'Hold Steady' have well-used riffs and lyrics and are the kind of filler that past albums had, whilst the title track is a decent commercial rocker for sure, but definitely not an attention-grabbing opener. Despite that it's an enjoyable album that tails off a little towards the end and maybe lacks a little power in the drum department, but for the most part the songs, playing and vocals are very good indeed. A welcome return.

Phil Ashcroft

101 SOUTH – ‘NO U-TURN’ (AOR Heaven)

It has been some seven years since we last heard from 101 South, the band formed back in 1999 around the nucleus of keyboardist Roger Scott Craig (also of Harlan Cage and once of Fortune) and distinctive vocalist Gregory Lynn Hall. 'No U-Turn' is the third album and marks a welcome return for the band with their first two albums, the self titled debut from 2000 and 'Roll Of The Dice' two years later, still holding fond memories amongst the AOR community. To mark the bands comeback, Craig and Hall have been joined by a number of guest musicians including guitarists Billy Liesegang (Harlan Cage) and Ian Bairnson (Alan Parsons Project, Pilot) and the unmistakable voice of Chris Thompson (Manfred Mann) who appears on the dramatic closing number "Blue Skies" to perform a heart-warming duet with Gregory.

Born in Ireland and once a member of both The Merseybeats and Liverpool Express, Craig has been based over in Malibu, California for some years and this is very evident in the overall mood of this album which has a laid-back, relaxed and mellow vibe. The songs are predominantly mid-tempo, slick and effortlessly smooth and will hold considerable appeal for fans of classic Foreigner whilst also having elements of some of Supertramp's more commercial moments. Hall is still an impressive vocalist and the songwriting is consistent throughout with 'What Are You Gonna Do Anyway', 'End Of The Game' and 'Take Me Home' all being notable highlights with the emphasis on melody and warmth.

Craig and Hall have been absent from the scene for far too long and hopefully this latest collaboration will inspire the pair to work together again in the near future.

Dean Pedley

VARIOUS ARTISTS – ‘PROG AROUND THE WORLD’ (Magna Carta)

This release is little more than a promotional CD for the label and in my view would have been better used as a freebie with a specialist Prog magazine such as Classic Prog, as I can't see where the market is for this album.

Most devotees of the genre will probably own the majority of the albums featured and there has to be a limited number of people who are going to buy it to simply test the waters.

For the record there are 12 tracks from different Progressive acts, all of whom have had albums released via the Magna Carta label; a number of which I have reviewed for this magazine so I'm not going to go into detail again here.

The tracks on offer are 'Moron Face' by Martone (from the album 'Clean'), 'Another Existence' from Age Of Nemesiss ('Terra Incognita'), 'Holes' from Liquid Trio Experiment ('Spontaneous Combustion'), 'I Don't Wanna Die' by Derdian ('New Era Pt. 2: War Of The Gods'), 'Ancient Land' from Ethan Brosh ('Out Of Oblivion'), 'Intuition' from Lemur Voice ('Insights'), 'Armchair Journey' from Ozric Tentacles ('The Floor's Too Far Away'), 'Spiritual Jewel' by Khallice ('The Journey'), 'El Terrible' from Stripsearch ('Stripsearch'), 'Elevation' by The Hideous Sun Demons ('Hideous Sun Demons'), 'Lion-Snake' from Anthropia ('The Ereyñ Chronicles') and 'Hydra' from Ola Frenning & Christopher Malmstrom ('Guitars That Ate My Brain' another Various Artists release).

It's an eclectic mix of styles within the genre and is all the more interesting because of that, but ultimately who is going to buy it? The inquisitive, I suspect.

Gary Marshall

THE LETTER BLACK – ‘BREAKING THE SILENCE’ (Tooth And Nail)

Originally starting out as a husband and wife duo come worship band at their local church under the moniker 'Breaking The Silence' and recording one album entitled 'Stand', the band have now hit the big stage via the largest Christian music label in the world.

If your penchant is for bands like Paramore, Halestorm or Flyleaf then The Letter Black will no doubt tick all the right boxes. From the powerful opener 'Moving On' through to the catchy single 'Hanging By A Thread' or the Corsr-like 'Best Of Me' it's perfect chart fodder from start to finish even if it does peter out toward the end.

Currently out supporting Skillet in the US The Letter Black is a band to watch in 2010, when no doubt we will get a full album.

Mike Newdeck

KIMBERLEY DAHME – ‘CAN’T A GIRL CHANGE HER MIND?’ (Escape)

A label stepping out of its usual musical territory always seems to create a certain level of negativity amongst the cognoscenti. Well, please allow me to present a different slant in my review, because I think this is a pretty decent country rock lite album and if Escape can market singer/songwriter Kimberley Dahme effectively, they could have a really big seller on their hands.

As I've mentioned before, I'm not one confined by narrow genres in my musical preferences and those of you

SHADOW GALLERY – ‘DIGITAL GHOSTS’ (Inside Out)



With the sad demise of Shadow Gallery vocalist Mike Baker last year, I, like many, thought Shadow Gallery would probably break up and maybe morph into a new but different band. This I'm glad to say didn't happen because the remaining members, in a tribute to Mike, decided to keep the name and the band alive by recording an album that is probably the most Shadow Gallery sounding album that they have ever put together. As soon as the music blasts from the speakers there can be no doubt that you are listening to Shadow Gallery, everything that gave the band their sound, their soul is here. The guitars of Brendt Allman ring out, Carl Cadden-James' bass rumbles, and everything else played by the multi-talented Gary Wehrkamp subtly powers the songs along, but what of the vocals I'm sure you will ask

now that Mike Baker is no longer with us?

Well to that I will give praise where it's due because Shadow Gallery haven't gone down the route of just finding a Mike Baker clone and just carrying on as before. Far from it, they have in fact gone for a singer who has a lot more in common with latter day Geoff Tate than with Mike Baker. The man in question is one Brian Ashland, who has a very different vocal style and delivery than that of the late great Baker, and this will, I'm sure, help to bring a new lease of life to the band and their music.

And what music! 'Digital Ghosts' is full of clever, forceful, yet also very melodic progressive metal/rock, songs that had me reaching for the repeat button the moment the album finished playing. It's the pacing of this album that appealed to me so much because it makes this new album a joy to listen to. Nothing has been recorded that doesn't need to be there, everything on this album is just right, everything.

If you're an old fan of the band then this will already be on your shopping list or already bought, if you're new to the band then it's a wonderful introduction to one of prog rock's best kept secrets. If you get the limited edition version of this CD you will find four bonus tracks, two of which feature Mike Baker on vocals, so you just can't go wrong. A great comeback.

Ian Johnson

reading this magazine who are similarly broad-minded, and have any sort of leaning towards Country music and to female vocalists in general, and furthermore count the likes of Robin Beck, Lisa Hartmann and/or Shania Twain within your music collections, would do well to give this album a chance. Kimberley Dahme has not only a very pleasing voice, she is also a stunner to look at (not that this should count for anything, of course!) So, do have a listen to appealing songs such as 'Rock You Like A Baby' 'Lighthouse', 'The Only Man' and the a-capella 'No Question'. They represent a variety of styles on this album and they're all of them radio ready too, and the great marketing would happily find a place on one of the Radio 2 or 6 shows presented by Bob Harris (but I've just checked his playlists going back to the start of October, and there is no sign...) for instance. I would also recommend sending a copy to Ken Bruce...

In case you are unaware, Kimberley does have something of a melodic rock pedigree as she became a member of Boston in 2001. Playing bass and sharing vocal duties, she may be heard on the band's most recent album, 'Corporate America' and also contributed the song 'With You' to that release (it's also the final track on this album). Various members of the band (including guitarist Tom Scholz, keyboardist Gary Pihl and drummer Jeff Neal) appear on Kimberley's album, as do Glen Burtnik and Stryper's Timothy Gaines – so this is no lightweight release.

"Can't A Girl Change Her Mind" is a very "different" album from the Escape Music guys – and one that should not be dismissed as readily as it has been in some quarters. It will certainly reappear in my player from time to time and in its genre, it's a peach of an album.

Paul Jerome Smith

DECADENZE – ‘BEYOND OBSESSION’ (Rocksector Records)

Welsh rockers Decadenze first came to my attention when they supported Magnum on their UK tour at the tail end of last year and so impressive were they that I immediately fought my way to the merchandise stand to purchase their debut album 'Beyond Obsession'. On first listen what became immediately apparent was that Decadenze are as impressive in the studio as they are on the stage.

So with a name like Decadenze you must be thinking that this is a down and dirty, sleazy set of songs, and well you'd be partly correct. That however is only one side of the story here, as across the ten tracks on the album Decadenze turn their hand to straight ahead balls-out rockers, good time bluesy rock and roll, riffyfast metal that nears speeded up stoner territory and the aforementioned sleazy, party rock. More importantly they blend all of these styles well and the end result is really very impressive indeed. The twin guitar ferocity of Adam Dive and Phil Haycock sounds like a pair of veterans that have been a solid unit for decades and thanks to a thick, biting production, time and again the songs really hit home with a punchy, long-lasting impact. Add to that an extremely well oiled rhythm section in Steve Edge on bass and Rich Newsome on drums and musically Decadenze are a serious force to be reckoned with. Many young hopefuls stand or fall on the skills of their frontman and in Chris Edge, Steve's brother, this is another area where Decadenze have absolutely no worries. His voice is strong and rich and he attacks the songs with a confidence that lifts an already effective album to the next level.

'Hit It Hard', 'Wasted Life' or 'The Otherside' have mighty riffs that sound like Black Stone Cherry teaming up with the Wildhearts and jamming with Hanoi Rocks! 'Shoot Me High' is reminiscent of Vain - although the guitar attack is unquestionably heavier - it also contains a great melodic six string solo. Chris Edge consistently puts in a stirring vocal performance; he has touches of many other singers, but not enough to really sound like anyone other than himself, and his voice is just such a perfect fit for this kind of music. Drummer Rich Newsome also shines throughout, he is a rock solid base for all the guitar heavy tracks, however he isn't content with remaining in the background as his playing is interesting and dynamic. The best illustration of this is 'Don't Fear Me' which he drives along frenetically before slowing things right down for a superb string laden outro. It is very different to anything else on the album, but a great indication that Decadenze have much to offer in a variety of different ways and hopefully the band's forthcoming EP 'Gambler's Payback', due for release in early 2010 will continue that trend.

Steven Reid

KNIGHT AREA – ‘REALM OF SHADOWS’ (Laser’s Edge)

I have been looking forward to this release for ages and now that its here I have to say that the wait has definitely been worth it. If, like me, you are into classic Prog that is keyboard oriented then this album is one that you are going to want to add to your collection. The advertising for this release has suggested that Knight Area have gone dark and moody; I'll concede that it's a tad darker than their earlier albums, but it's not a dramatic shift in emphasis, more an added colour to their palette. Overall, this is a classy, beautifully written and played album of superbly delivered Prog.

Gerben Klazinga is the band's leading light as main songwriter and keyboard player and whilst his instruments tend to hold centre stage they don't overpower the rest of the band or the songs. Mark Smit's voice fits the music perfectly; Mark Vermeule contributes some sublime guitar moments whilst Gijs Koopman (bass) and Pieter van Hoornt (drums) are everything you'd expect from a great Prog rhythm section.

Each of the above gets to shine on the opening track 'Ethereal', which opens with a keyboard intro that says "you're in for something special", the drums are quality and the bass line a delight. As I listen to this track I am minded of a cross between IQ and 'Then There Were Three' era Genesis, the former for the song structure and the latter for the keyboard sounds employed. While tonally he doesn't sound like Peter Nicholls (IQ) Smit's delivery and style is very similar hence the IQ comparison crops up a few times as do Pallas, Touchstone and Tony Banks (Genesis). The guitar solo on this track has the hallmarks of Adam Hodgson (Touchstone) which is praise indeed. 'Antagonist' opens with a piano refrain before a staccato guitar joins in along with an organ refrain and the drums aping the guitar. When the full riff kicks in I am again minded of Touchstone although the rest of the song takes on its own persona. Again the guitar solo is wonderfully delivered and appropriate, as they are throughout the album, and drums are of Portnoy-esque proportions.

'Two of a Kind' changes the dynamic with an acoustic guitar riff and a laid back feel that is led by a nice piano melody and a synth lead on the chorus. The track builds in intensity but suddenly returns to the opening theme, which is testament to the band's arranging capabilities. In amongst the long tracks are two that clock in at less than three minutes and both are instrumentals, the first, 'Momentum' has a wonderful bass motif running through it and features the guitar as the lead. It has the Pallas vibe and is actually a little too short to my mind. I suppose this is where the 'dark' aspect comes from as it finishes on a bit of a flurry with some Dream Theater style histrionics. 'Awakening' is a piano ballad with some 'Wind & Wuthering' style keyboards alongside. 'Dark Souls' starts out like Dream Theater but moves into more KA territory about halfway through. Pallas again comes to mind with the big orchestral keyboards underpinning a great riff in the closing stages. After the bombast of the previous track the title number takes the pace down. The chorus is glorious as is the one that follows on 'A Million Lives' which is highly melodic and truly memorable. In fact it's stuck in my head as has the keyboard refrain.

The album closes with the longest number which is an 11 minute epic, which really doesn't seem that long. 'Occlusion' starts out slowly but builds as one might expect. It passes through different phases and features some very fine keyboard contributions, which I suspect will have a few air keyboardists strutting their stuff. A laid back guitar solo also features some lovely bass pedals (I love those and they had me purring with delight).

This is a wonderful album that has all the attributes I enjoy most about the Prog genre and high on that list is great songs with hooks, strong melodies, a good vocalist and some fine musicianship; this album has them all. The keyboards are lush and always right for the song. This is a concept album, but I have ignored that on the basis that songs work on a stand alone basis.

Yet another contender for the woefully inadequate allocation of just five places in my 'Albums of the Year'.

Gary Marshall

STEVE CONTE – ‘STEVE CONTE & THE CRAZY TRUTH’ (Townsend Records)

Currently a member of the New York Dolls and former guitarist of the much missed Company of Wolves, Steve Conte releases this, his latest project with his band The Crazy Truth. I loved the last NYD album – 'Cause I Sez So' (albeit mainly due to the involvement of Todd Rundgren) and I'm pleased to say, this album has surprised me in just how different it is to that release and everything else he's ever done.

It's a mix of pop-punk and garage and anyone who likes that low-slung guitar/shouty chorus kind of sleaze rock will absolutely love this. Strangely, the first track is called 'This is The End' – a straight ahead rocker with a great riff, but you wouldn't expect anything less from Conte really. The Tom Waits style of 'Texas T' makes you feel like you're in a sleazy bar somewhere and lyrics like "let's rock like the Marquis de Sade" and "another drag queen drama queen,

future exporn star" from 'The Goods Are Odd' kind of sum up the sarcasm and tongue-in-cheek humour of the album. Featuring Lee 'Leeko' Kostrinsky on bass and vocals and Phil Stewart on drums and backing vocals, this jangly three piece thrash out these high energy tunes and it makes you just want to sing along.

I'd love to see this band live as Steve was very much the star when I saw him with the NYD recently. 'The Truth Ain't Pretty' is the kind of anthem bands like Faster Pussycat would kill for. Lyrically, the songs are very well written, more more so than 'Busload Of Hope', with it's female backing vocalists really making it for me - a bluesy masterpiece.

As for "Strumptheartedmonkeygirl" – I'd love to know what inspired THAT song! Overall, I love this album. I can see this being something I'll be playing years from now. A good fun, rock 'n' roll album. In the current climate, this is just what we need.

Sue Ashcroft

YOTANGOR - ‘KING OF THE UNIVERSE’ (Brennus Music)

The closing stages of 2009 brought forth some tremendous music within the genres covered by this magazine. For me, the most interesting and most entertaining of the lot was a conceptual double CD from a French symphonic metal septet including three female voices. The band is Yotangor, they originate in Toulouse and unbelievably 'King Of The Universe' is their debut release!

Lead vocalist Yngrid Allières has a sweet voice and is ably supported by keyboardists Vanessa J. Wood and Corinne "Coxx" Fourmont on the lush harmonies; and these feature on many of the 26 tracks here (there are a couple of instrumentals and one 'Feeling Down' with male lead vocals). What makes this such an incredible album for a debut is the sheer scope of the project and the fact that the songs flow effortlessly from one to another, nothing being indigestible or extreme. You can go and sample four of the songs ('About Love', 'Another Place', 'Shadows' and the title track) at their MySpace Music site (http://www.myspace.com/yotangor) and when you have done this you need to know that these are not merely the best of what is on offer, but simply a really representative sample of what you get when you buy this album.

There is, I suppose, nothing earth-shatteringly original here; but it is, I can assure you, an amalgam of all the very best features of the various femme rock & metal bands of recent times that we can all name. This synthesis of symphonic rock and metal (plus some gothic overtones), one or two progressive moments and sound effects, occasional operatic sections, as well as some great AOR songs makes for a fantastic aural experience. And if the impressive, quality songs and the outstanding vocal arrangements are not enough for you, then the bombastic and grandiose playing by a band comprised of apparently very experienced musicians (albeit not ones we have previously encountered) should be...

As I mentioned at the beginning of this review, the album is conceptual – and I feel it does gain from being played sequentially - although such is the quality of the individual songs, that they also work in isolation from one another. If you can follow the lyrical content (it's very difficult to read some of these in the booklet) you will discern a story that is about a modern dictator who chooses to ignore the consequences of his actions but gets a chance to undo his evil deeds following his demise. (Well, I think that's it in a nutshell, anyway!)

Mark my words: this is a sensational release – and if you are in any way a fan of female vocals in a melodic rock/metal setting, then I plead with you to investigate 'King Of The Universe' for yourself. If you do, and then decide not to make a purchase, I will be truly flabbergasted!

Paul Jerome Smith

BON JOVI - THE CIRCLE (Mercury)

Bon Jovi are back with their 11th studio album and it seems like they've left behind their experimental era and finally gone back to their roots. During the past nine years they've built a huge fan base - not least because the band has changed their sound a lot, from Rock 'n' Roll in all its purity to mainstream, but after 'Crush', 'Bounce', 'Have a Nice Day' and 'Lost Highway' Bon Jovi have produced a fantastic rock album at last.

'We Weren't Born to Follow' – the first radio single – is a good opener and a very typical Bon Jovi song which has a similar character to 'It's My Life', 'Have A Nice Day' and 'We Got It Goin' On'. It's an absolutely catchy song but it sounds very much like a cheap copy of 'Born to Be My Baby' and I guess that this one, unfortunately, will end up being the best known track on the whole album. The second track 'When We Were Beautiful' mirrors the phase Bon Jovi is in today by treating the topic of past times and the present days. In its beautiful metaphors, and especially in the very emotional and melancholic guitar solo, everybody gets hooked on the feeling the song should transmit. 'Work For The Working Man' sounds a little bit like 'Livin' On A Prayer' in reverse, but nevertheless it grows very characteristic and powerful, not least because of Jon's voice increasing and decreasing again and again. The lyrics, anyway, are worth being examined more closely!

'Bullet' is a rather untypical song for this band and is accompanied with a deep and dark drum rhythm giving this one a very energetic and demanding sound. The great guitar solo reminds one of several Bon Jovi tracks from former records and so does the next song, 'Thorn In My Side' - a fantastically composed hymn. From the first time you hear it one can imagine a huge crowd singing along "whoohahoh". Another mentionable song is 'BrokenProm-iseLand' including strong words and sweeping power. 'Love's The Only Rule' follows as maybe the strongest track on this record. It begins like a ballad but builds with a lot of drums, guitars, bass and especially feeling, to create a fantastic rock song.

'Learn to Love' closes this album, and is a wonderful ballad filled with all the strength and emotion a musician could give his songs. Even though it seems to be a love song at the first moment, this is the ballad of a very honest, melancholic and deeply touched man sung in such an energetic manner, one can feel every word and every tone just as if they were one's own.

I guess 'The Circle' is actually the best album since 'These Days'. Bon Jovi seem to have finally understood that it's not worth any experiments, neither pop nor country. They should just stay themselves and write how they think, play how they feel and sing for their dear lives. 'The Circle' is the expression of how 25 years of fame developed a man and for what he has left behind on his long journey. Bon Jovi say it loud and clear that they weren't born to follow, so why change? They should stay on that path they're walking now and become rockers again! With 'The Circle' they may just have made a good start...

Julia Braumn

CHRIS VAUGHN – ‘...FOR THOSE THAT HAVE EARS’ (Independent)

A New Jersey native, Chris Vaughn has spent a significant amount of time writing and performing in his local area, and released his demo 'Against The Grain' which helped him start drawing in regular audiences. However, in a bid to take the next step up the ladder, Vaughn came up with a novel idea of producing a film documenting his attempts to reach one of his Hometown heroes, Bruce Springsteen or Jon Bon Jovi, and gain their interest in his abilities and gain a helping hand. Vaughn put his house up for sale to finance the film, and luckily landed Springsteen at the Eleventh hour to join. 'Jerry Boy Hero' will be released in 2010, and there is a trailer on Chris' website, www.chrisvaughnonline.com.

The title '...For Those That Have Ears' has many meanings, the most obvious being Vaughn's respect for artist Vincent Van Gogh, who cut off his ear for love. Musically, I was expecting some Springsteen / Mellencamp style Americana, and while it's fair to say this forms the basis for the material, in delivery it has a more contemporary sound, a lot heavier, and much, much darker. It reminds me a little of early Shinedown, though with less crunch in the guitars, and adding a small Grunge influence from Pearl Jam. Vaughn's voice is deep and powerful, and not a million miles from the sound of Brent Smith from the aforementioned Shinedown.

Lead track 'Relate' has a mid-tempo shuffling beat, beginning gently on acoustic, but with a powerful chorus, and featuring some fine guitar work from Kennan Keating. The hook-laden 'Fallen Angel' is probably the most accessible track on the album, up-tempo and catchy, and the obvious choice for first single, with 'Habit' and 'Lady Love' not far behind. Rootsy ballads feature in 'Speak', 'So Alive' and 'Still The Same', while 'High Expectations', 'Lady Love' and 'Music Writer' are steeped in atmospheric, with the latter namechecking Rob Thomas, whose own band Matchbox 20 are another reference point for the musical style. The introspective 'Treading Water' is the darkest song on offer, a moody acoustic melody giving way to a crunching riff and soaring vocal from Vaughn. Not an instant fix by any means, but after repeated plays the subtle melodies embed themselves in your head and refuse to let go. A very good first effort, and worthy of the attention of those searching for something contemporary.

Ant Heeks

PANIC ROOM – ‘SATELLITE’ (Voiceprint / Firefly Music)



This is the second album from Panic Room, and it provides quite a contrast from their extremely diverse debut 'Visionary Position' (reviewed in Fireworks 32). On that occasion, the term "progressive" was entirely appropriate, given the experimental and lengthy nature of four of the eight tracks. This time around, the band (which, you will hopefully remember comprises four ex-members of Karnataka, plus bass player Alun Vaughan) has demonstrated their ability to write an extraordinary set of really quite sophisticated songs, some of which have a slightly experimental or whimsical edge to them. I cannot really regard this as a "prog" album per sé; more properly it could, perhaps, be categorised as melodic pop/rock with occasional progressive tendencies.

Last time around few opportunities were presented for talented guitarist Paul Davies to demonstrate his individual prowess, but instead he contributed very effectively to the layering and textures of sound that characterised the debut. He does the same here, but there are a number of occasions where he is able to stretch out; and it's always a delight to hear his passionate approach! Jonathan Edwards' keyboards are once again a major foundation to the overall sound, feel and mood of each of the tracks, but time and time again I found myself full of admiration for the absolutely superb bass and drumming contributions from Alun Vaughan and Gavin John Griffiths. The crisp and precise production has brought a magical sonic quality to 'Satellite' and its baby brother (of which more anon!)

With repeated listens to the album I found myself referring more and more to the lyrics of each song. For me it is the overall sound of an album that first draws me in, but here I have found the lyrical and musical elements to be totally intertwined: a quite remarkable quality here. Anne-Marie Helder's vocals have come on in leaps and bounds and throughout 'Satellite' she gives formidable performances. On up-tempo opening song 'Freedom To Breathe' she absolutely oozes sensuality, while the slightly jazzy feel of 'Picking Up Knives', with its pointed social comment, leads to an appropriately different style that works a treat. It is here that the notable prominence of Gavin John Griffith's precise drumming is to be heard. Some may be critical of this; for me the balance is absolutely fine. 'I Am A Cat' is where whimsy creeps in, although I'm convinced the lyric is to some extent metaphorical. I love the loud purring at the end, by the way! 'The Fall' is a superb, passionate love song and includes some fine acoustic guitar. Anne-Marie's performance here is so redolent of Kate Bush!

Most of the songs on the album are Edwards/Helder joint compositions, but 'Black Noise' is a song of despair by Helder and Vaughan – an urgent, guitar-driven number with keyboard fills and throbbing bass. 'Yasumi' is the only Davies co-write and is the most powerful and emotional song on 'Satellite', Anne-Marie producing a stunning vocal to highlight the destruction of a tropical forest in Ecuador that contains the planet's greatest diversity of species. 'Sunshine' is by complete contrast a song of optimism, hope and wonder with partly whispered, breathy vocals. 'Into The Fire' is a lovely song that unfolds effortlessly about making the most of a relationship. 'Dark Star' is a moody, insistent and complex song that begins with bombastic organ, and unlike the preceding two songs, takes time to reveal its intricacies. 'Muse' is a short, gentle but haunting song featuring just piano and voice. Anne-Marie's vocals here inject a slightly dreamy, celtic feel. The title track – the longest on the album – concludes 'Satellite'. Its rather meandering structure and complex sounds and textured layers have meant that it has taken time to absorb. It is, however, a tremendous song and do watch out for the huge chorus!

These eleven songs constitute the album as released on Voiceprint. However, there is also a special edition of the album that comes with an additional 4-track bonus disc ('Little Satellite') and a very nice 20 page art booklet that is exclusively available from the band direct at their web site (www.panicroom.org.uk). There is no dip in quality amongst the four songs ('5th Amendment', 'The Great Divide' (another Helder/Vaughan co-write), 'Go' and the jaunty keyboard-led 'Sandstorms') and cat-lovers you should note that this bonus concludes with a longer version of the purring cat!

It's a phenomenal second album, and makes me wonder just what the members of Panic Room will have up their sleeves for us next time around. An essential purchase for everybody who likes quality melodic rock presented by a female voice and transcending precise genre categorisation!

Paul Jerome Smith

URIAH HEEP – ‘CELEBRATION’ (Ear Music)

Loved by fans and generally hated by critics, Uriah Heep have always been looked down upon by the latter as being a poor mans Deep Purple, so I guess nobody was as surprised as founder member Mick Box when their 2008 album 'Wake The Sleeper' – their first new music for 10 years – got almost universal praise. A similar thing happened twenty-eight years ago with 'Abominog' but I guess for most people the heyday of the band was the early to mid seventies when they were fronted by the late David Byron and had Ken Hensley writing most of their songs. 'Celebration' is a CD/DVD to commemorate forty years in the business with the band re-recording twelve songs from their back catalogue with the current line-up, along with two brand new songs and a DVD.

Despite the fact that I just referred to them as the "current line-up" there's only really drummer Russell Gilbrook who could be classed as new, with vocalist Bernie Shaw and keyboard player Phil Lanzon having clocked up twenty-odd Heep years apiece and bassist Trevor Bolder having occupied his position for a staggering thirty-four. Apart from the obvious difference in vocals and, especially, production (as much as I love the classic Heep albums, most of them sound like listening to an AM radio underwater), the classics are fairly faithfully reproduced, with Lanzon's massive Hammond sound dominating proceedings. Shaw actually has a bit of Byron in his delivery despite his higher pitch, and the likes of 'Bird Of Prey', 'Sunrise', 'Stealin'', 'July Morning', 'Look At Yourself', 'Easy Livin'', and the timeless 'Gypsy' all sound great, if a little different from what you're used to. The main surprises are the 'Innocent Victim' pair 'Free Me' and 'Free 'N' Easy' and their one concession to the Shaw era, 'Between Two Worlds' from the 1998s 'Sonic Origami' album, each given the 'Wake The Sleeper' sound by producer Mike Paxman. The two upbeat new tracks could easily have come from last years album with 'Only Human' riding on Gilbrook's pounding drum beat and 'Corridors Of Madness' being the kind of out and out rocker that made the album such a success.

The DVD has certainly confused me. I was at the Sweden Rock Festival last year and saw this show, which was the same set that they played on their last tour with 'Wake The Sleeper' played in it's entirety, in three sections divided by some of the classics featured on this package. However, this forty-five minute DVD omits all of the 'Wake The Sleeper' songs and just features songs from the early 70's. It's a good show and the band are on fine form, injecting fire into the old classics and getting an ecstatic reception for it. It's also well filmed and the sound is perfect, but I can only assume that the band intend to do something later on with the rest of the footage – maybe a WTS special edition with a bonus DVD?

'Celebration' is a nice way to mark the bands 40th Anniversary and update some of the milestones of their successful career, and whilst they've omitted some fantastic songs and albums (for instance, something from 'Firefly' and 'Abominog' would have been nice), the band have put a lot of work into it rather than just release another compilation into an already cluttered marketplace. I wonder what they'll do for their 50th?

Phil Ashcroft

LIKE A STORM – THE END OF THE BEGINNING' (Prospect Park)

Every so often a band comes along that ticks all the right boxes and Like A Storm do just that and then some. Hailing originally from New Zealand and now settled in Vancouver, the Kent brothers - the driving force behind the