



In Tune

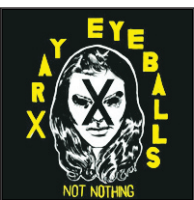
The Daily News

THURSDAY, APRIL 21, 2011

Making Hey



BABY DEE, “Regifted Light” (Drag City) ★★☆☆½ — While I try not to be swayed by first impressions (especially when said impressions are less than stellar), I confess that I’ve avoided reviewing the albums of transgender multi-instrumentalist Baby Dee whenever possible. So it was with more than a little trepidation that I tackled “Regifted Light.” Imagine my surprise when I found myself enjoying this mostly-instrumental collection of a dozen songs. “Mostly-instrumental” is the key, because there’s no arguing the fact that Dee is a gifted piano player. It’s the affected vocals that turn me off and here, she’s limited them to just four of the 12 songs. By scattering them amid some truly beautiful instrumentals, Dee’s vocals are more effective/less annoying than I usually find them to be. Opener “Cowboys With Cowboy Hat Hair” sets the orchestral tone, and Dee’s singing on the title track and sentimental “On the Day I Died” also works. Additional highlights include personal favorite “Coughing Up Cat Hair” and “The Move.” Easily my favorite Baby Dee record to date. (JS)



XRAY EYEBALLS, “Not Nothing” (Kanine) ★★☆☆½ — “Not Nothing,” the debut full-length from garage punks Xray Eyeballs, requires some patience. The first couple songs on the 11-track release are mediocre at best, which might lead you to believe that the O.J. San Felipe-fronted band isn’t worth the investment of time and energy. Yet somewhere around “Egyptian Magician” and “Po’ Jam,” the Eyeballs hit their stride and the remainder of the record is quite entertaining.

There’s a spooky haze hovering over the entire proceedings, but the Brooklyn-based collective show why they’re such favorites on the underground scene with keepers “Drums Not Dead,” “Xray Eyeballs Theme,” “Kam Sing Nights” and “Escape From That Girl.” (JS)



BRIAN SETZER, “Setzer Goes Instru-MENTAL!” (Surfdog) ★★☆☆ — Brian Setzer has done just about everything during a career that’s spanned some 30 years. He revived interest in rockabilly with the Stray Cats, helped make swing music cool again with the Brian Setzer Orchestra and now showcases his remarkable guitar and banjo skills on his first album of instrumentals, the aptly titled “Setzer Goes Instru-MENTAL!”

Mixing sizzling renditions of songs by the likes of Bill Monroe (“Blue Moon of Kentucky”), Gene Vincent (“Be-Bop-A-Lula”) and Earl Scruggs (“Earl’s Breakdown”) with a half dozen stellar originals, Setzer enthralls over the course of the 35-minute set. Among the originals, “Go-Go Godzilla,” “Hillbilly Jazz Meltdown” and “Pickpocket” are the standouts, though you won’t go wrong with anything here. (JS)



MODDI, “Floriography” (Propeller) ★★☆☆½ — Norwegian singer/songwriter Pal Moddi Knutsen isn’t going to lure you onto the dance floor with his “Floriography” debut, but there’s a whole lot to love about these nine low-key tunes. It’s a record that’s quiet and moody, yet never crosses over into depressing territory as the talented Moddi weaves his musical spell.

Most of the songs here are in English — set closer “Krokstav-emne” being the notable exception — and Moddi’s haunting lyrics are brought to life by his Damien Rice-like tenor. Keepers include the atmospheric opening one-two punch of “Rubbles” and “Maggie Eggs,” along with “Smoke,” “Poetry” and “Stuck In the Waltz.” While “Floriography,” which topped the charts in Norway, isn’t likely to match that kind of success in the U.S., it’s an album worth exploring. (JS)



CLARA MAY, “Hush” (self-released) ★★☆☆½ — Clara May are, in fact, the Chicago-based indie folk/pop duo of Tom Silva and Nicole Sotelo and their “Hush” debut is an intriguing collection of tunes that stay true to the band’s social consciousness. The Malaysian-born Silva anchors the 10-track release with his rich baritone, but Sotelo injects the album with a needed boy-girl dynamic that makes things soar.

Opener “Own That Feeling” sets the tone perfectly, and Clara May roll out a series of standout tracks in “Location of Culture,” “Good Morning,” “Scrawl,” “Lullaby” and “Diaspora.” To their credit, Silva and Sotelo tackle weighty topics like identity, racism and ethnic conflict without ever coming across as preachy. This one’s a winner, folks. (JS)

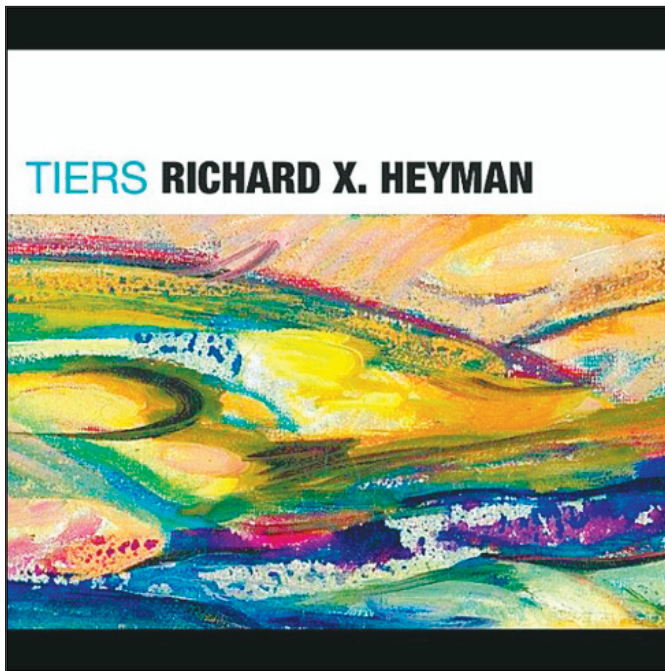


BREAKING LACES, “When You Find Out” (Tenacity) ★★☆☆½ — Initially a solo project for Willem Hartong, Breaking Laces have developed into a first-rate indie pop trio over the course of a handful of albums. Their latest effort, the imminently listenable “When You Find Out,” might be the platter that really breaks the Brooklyn-based Laces into the mainstream consciousness.

The 12-track release is chock full of infectious melodies and catchy hooks that seem perfectly suited for driving around town with the windows rolled down. Among the highlights here are “What We Need,” “We Can Be Great,” “Laser Beams,” “Shopping for Two,” “Carry On,” “Post-Graduation March” and set closer “I Do, I Don’t.” If you haven’t heard Breaking Laces yet, I urge you to give “When You Find Out” a spin. (JS)



THE ORION EXPERIENCE, “NYC Girl” (self-released) ★★☆☆ — Already a fixture on the New York City underground scene, indie pop quintet the Orion Experience seem poised for mainstream success. After non-stop spinning of their ridiculously



Double dose of Heyman may be a little too much

RICHARD X. HEYMAN, “Tiers/And Other Stories” (Turn-Up) ★☆☆ — Maybe Manhattan’s Richard X. Heyman really is, as some critics like to gush, “America’s greatest unsung hero of power pop.” Though he’s got only a few albums to his credit, every one has been heaped with praise dating back to his 1988 “Living Room!!” debut. And while I admit to possessing just a cursory knowledge of Heyman’s stuff, I don’t know that I find him worthy of such lofty acclaim.

His latest project, the ambitious “Tiers/And Other Stories” offers multiple glimpses of his undeniable abilities, but it’s way too easy to get lost in the 31-track, 132-minute, two-disc effort. Heyman insists that these are two separate platters packaged together, rather than a traditional double album, but whatever he wants to call it, there’s just too much to digest.

“Tiers” is the better of the two, with its symphonic-leaning 15 tracks telling the story of Heyman’s relationship with wife/bassist/collaborator Nancy Leigh. Told in chronological order, it’s a touching (if a bit mellow) cycle of songs. Highlights include “Golden In This Town,” country ballad “Good to Go,” “The Real Deal” and “Everyone’s Moving In the Wrong Direction.”

“And Other Stories” has some nice moments in “Birds,” “No Time to Rest on Sunday,” “Gravity” and “Hustler’s Last Stand,” but by the time “Heaven Surrounds Me” brings the proceedings to a close, I was ready for the record to end. (Jeffrey Sisk)

enjoyable “NYC Girl” EP in recent weeks, I eagerly sought out the band’s back catalog. With catchy melodies galore, this five-track release figures to be the most fun you’ll have all day.

The stellar title track kicks off the proceedings, and the keepers continue from frontman Orion Simprini and his mates with “Emerald Eyes,” “Vampire” and “Sweet Friend.” The remaining tune, “Rollercoaster,” pales slightly when compared to the rest of “NYC Girl,” but is better than most anything else you’ll hear these days. Quite the Experience, indeed. (JS)



TRACY NELSON, “Victim of the Blues” (Delta Groove) ★☆☆ — With a career that spans some six decades, Chicago native Tracy Nelson has been one of country and blues music’s most enduring voices with more than two dozen albums to her credit as a solo performer and front-woman for Mother Earth in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Amazingly, at age 63, Nelson may have crafted her finest record to date in “Victim of the Blues.”

Her husky voice has never sounded better as she delivers stellar readings of blues classics by Howlin’ Wolf (“Howlin’ for My Baby”), Willie Dixon (You’ll Be Mine”), Jimmy Reed (“I Know It’s a Sin”), Lightnin’ Hopkins (“Feel So Bad”) and Ma Rainey (the title track). Additional highlights include “Lead a Horse To Water” and “The Love You Save,” though you won’t go wrong with any of the 11 tracks. (JS)



BILL CALLAHAN, “Apocalypse” (Drag City) ★★☆☆½ — Two years ago this month, I was absolutely blown away when Bill Callahan’s “Sometimes I Wish I Were an Eagle” came across my desk. After spending the better part of two decades as a lo-fi pioneer under the Smog moniker, Callahan went back to his given name and raised the bar on an already successful career. As much as I loved the last record — and it’s one I still spin regularly — Callahan has outdone himself on the sublime “Apocalypse.”

The 44-year-old is at the top of his game on this seven-track collection of deeply personal tunes delivered in his distinctive, soothing baritone. From the opening strains of “Drover” to the final notes of sprawling closer (and personal favorite) “One Fine Morning,” Callahan has cobbled together 40 minutes of sonic perfection. While every song is dynamite, he soars especially high on “Baby’s Breath,”

“Riding for the Feeling” and “America!” An absolute essential addition to your collection. (JS)



THE STROKES, “Angles” (RCA) ★☆☆ — When the Strokes exploded onto the scene a decade ago, I didn’t get all the fuss. The Big Apple-based quintet was adored by critics and worshipped in hipster circles, but I felt 2001’s “Is This It” and 2003’s “Room on Fire” were (gasp!) overrated. I’ve since come to my senses (now that the hype has long since faded) and appreciate those early Strokes records a great deal. But after 2006’s middling “First Impressions of Earth,” it seemed like the band might be through.

After a lengthy hiatus, Julian Casablancas and the boys are back with “Angles,” a first-rate record that shows the Strokes have still got it. “Under Cover of Darkness,” “Two Kinds of Happiness,” “Taken for a Fool” and “Gratisfaction” are the highlights of the 10-track set, but there really isn’t a bad tune in the bunch. Welcome back, gentlemen. (JS)



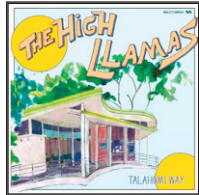
O’DEATH, “Outside” (Ernest Jennings) ★☆☆ — Indie rock collective O’Death have a truly unique sound, blending elements of Appalachian mountain music, punk and rock into an always interesting musical stew. Their career-long streak of first-rate records continues with “Outside,” the Brooklyn-based quintet’s third full-length. This 11-track gem finds O’Death showcasing their banjo-driven sound to maximum effectiveness.

The opening triumvirate of “Bugs,” “Ghost Head” and “Alamar” is nothing short of fantastic, and the guys continue churning out keepers in “Black Dress,” “Look at the Sun,” “Don’t Come Back,” “Pushing Out” and the “The Lake Departed.” O’Death’s ragged vocals might not appeal to all listeners, but they are perfectly suited for what the band is trying to accomplish. Good stuff. (JS)



THE BELLE BRIGADE, self-titled (Reprise) ★☆☆ — Anchored by the soaring boy-girl harmonies of siblings Ethan and Barbara Gruska, the Belle Brigade are a refreshing throw-back to the California pop sound of the 1970s. The grandchildren of renowned film composer John Williams, music is in the Gruskas’ blood and they are well on the way to making a name for themselves with this delightful self-titled debut.

With influences as varied as Fleetwood Mac (“Where Not to Look for Freedom” sounds like a lost track from “Rumours”), Simon & Garfunkel and Stevie Wonder, the Belle Brigade offer something for everyone on this 11-track platter. Highlights include “Sweet Louise,” the uplifting “Losers,” “Shirt,” “Lucky Guy,” “Punch Line” and “My Goodness,” though you’ll be hard-pressed to find a song you don’t enjoy. (JS)



THE HIGH LLAMAS, “Talahomi Way” (Drag City) ★☆☆½ — I’ve never really warmed to the indie pop of the British outfit the High Llamas. Sean O’Hagen is the driving force behind the band and he’s churned out some well-received records over the past two decades. Yet while I’ve understood and respected the appeal of the Llamas, I’ve never been able to count myself among their fans. Until now.

“Talahomi Way” is their first album since 2007’s “Can Cladders” and the rejuvenated High Llamas have never sounded better to me. O’Hagen is a strong lyricist, yet some of the 12-song album’s most effective tracks are instrumentals. “Wander, Jack Wander” and “To the Abbey” are instrumentals. Additional keepers include “Berry Adams,” “Take My Hand,” “Fly Baby, Fly,” “A Rock In May” and the title track. Finally, I see what the fuss is all about. Better late than never, I suppose. (JS)



VREID, “V” (The End/Indie Recordings) ★☆☆½ — Nordic black metallers Vreid apparently have let their brains do some exploration since their last record, the excellent WWII-fueled “Milorg.” On “V,” their fifth, obviously, they branch out their sound to include more ’70s-style progressive rock. They’re onto something with this ashier Opeth approach, but the machination needs a bit of work.

The nine-track record is their most spacious yet, and it becomes clear with opener “Arche” that their philosophy has changed. Sure, they’re still majestically heavy on “The Blood Eagle,” Maiden-inspired “Wolverine Bastards,” and “Welcome to the Asylum” (which feels a little gimmicky). But they really show off their new wares on near-11-minute “The Other and the Look,” where airy synth and proggy folk take a stronghold, “The Sound of the River,” and “Slave,” which starts with military-style tapping before inviting clear, Euro-flushed singing and clean guitar work into the picture. It’s cool to hear a veteran act change their style a bit, and chances are the fruit will taste a lot better on record six. (Brian Krasman)



SEPTICFLESH, “The Great Mass” (Season of Mist) ★☆☆ — Give Greek orchestral, blackened death stalwarts Septicflesh credit for their ambition and refusal to play it safe. That paid off in spades on their 2008 record “Communion” but pretty much blows up in their faces on “The Great Mass.”

Once again working with the Philharmonic Orchestra of Prague, their eighth record is an example of overthinking, overstuffing and overdoing. The 10-track record never really sets itself up for success, as it’s way, way over the top. The songs don’t really stand out, the drama gets too silly to be taken seriously, and pretty much from the word go, the entire thing blows off the rails. Opinions have varied on this — Decibel gave this 9 out of 10 — but for my tastes, it’s an example of overindulgence for the sake of overindulgence. (BK)

So much music, so little space ... see more reviews of new CDs in Saturday's In Tune