

Astra Kelly and Far Rockaway *Subtown Rituals*

Label: Far Rockaway Records
Producer: Gerry Johnson & Jerry Dombusch, Astra Kelly
Engineer: Gerry Johnson
Recorded: 35th Street Studios
Reviewer: Michael Finnegan



On the surface, the songs on *Subtown Rituals* might seem too happy, optimistic, or even perky. That's just the natural energy of this band seeping up from underneath. Astra Kelly, singer/songwriter/guitarist and leader of Far Rockaway is no wild-eyed optimist, but she does appear to be a wild-eyed realist.

Regular Far Rockaways band member Devon Staples on drums, and Ken Schwartz on bass, are both alumni of the recently defunct Chicago group Cassius Clay. They are joined on this album by rapper Cim Filichia of Dirt Mercants, Josh Bell on sax (also of the late Cassius Clay), guitarist Robert Byrne from Dovetail Joint, and Henry Danson also plays drums.

The lyrics are intelligent and Kelly opts, more often than not, for alliteration in the writing rather than a quick dash to a cheap and easy rhyme. Of the eleven songs on this CD, more than half have good hooks that allow the listener to sing, dance, or otherwise get involved in the music, sometimes on the first listen (shamefully, I always end up adding extra words of my own invention). From the heavily hooked pop/rock songs like "Change Happens," "Use It," "The Key," "Warrior," "Beautiful and Sunshine and Mr. Blue (Sky)" to the more involved "Free From You," "The Love Song," "Never Said You Were Wrong," "Caught A Window" and "1000 Faces," *Subtown Rituals* is full of well written, well played Rockaway music.

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The Screaming Blueudogs *The Screaming Blueudogs*

Label: Blueudog Records
Producer: The Screaming Blueudogs
Engineer: Jolan Poston
Recorded: Acme Recorders
Reviewer: Odysseus Johnson



One of the great luxuries of living at the epicenter of our great blues scene is observing many of the fine young blues bands as they evolve. With a raw sound that appears loosely based on Otis Spann, Pinetop Perkins and early Paul Butterfield Blues Band, The Screaming Blueudogs are making an impact on the area's blues clubs based on the strength of their self-titled debut.

The Blueudogs, a four piece combo, do a nice job working through a variety of traditional influences. The band has a good sense of dynamics playing through "I Don't Like Workin'," a joke-joint wailer, as well as, "Winners & Losers," a blues ballad. The band's material (8 originals) contains quite a few interesting influences like the Professor Longhair feel on "Shake It, Don't Break It," but this is in

fect a blues record and you won't be disappointed with tunes like "Friday Night," "Depression Blues" and "First Is The Worst."

Marc Suwanski is featured on vocals as well as turning in some thoughtful keyboard work. Kevin Maring's muscular lead and rhythm guitar work act as a nice foil to the keys throughout the recording, while Chris Maring (bass) and Ken Strivson (drums) anchor down the rhythm section. It'll be interesting to watch these guys continue developing as regulars on the scene.

Big Hello *Apple Album*

Label: Parasol Records
Producer: Big Hello, Jimmy Johnson
Engineer: Jimmy Johnson
Recorded: Noise Chamber
Reviewer: Robert F. Gabella



From the hard-driving power pop rock of "O' Canada," the opening track to Big Hello's *Apple Album*, there's an air of familiarity and warmth. Could it be you're hearing Go-Gos that can actually play worth a darn, or even the sweeter, more wholesome side of Throwing Muses? Or Missing Persons? Or maybe even early Tubes (remember "Don't Touch Me There"... I do). But there's something more. This quartet, founded by songwriter/drummer (and former Elvis Brother) Brad Elvis, is full to the brim with solid rock 'n' roll hooks and charm. In addition to Elvis, the group consists of Johnny Million on guitar, j.a.c.k.i.e. on bass, and Chloe F. Orwell on vocals.

As the album moves along with cuts like "Star 67," the fresh but familiar approach continues. Along with Orwell's lead, the guys pitch in for some sweet sing-along harmonies. Though the tune may have a retro-80's feel, the lyric makes the most of a contemporary technological convenience: "Star 67, punch you in, and punch you out/Star 67, don't you feel stupid now?" On the next track, "Today Will Be Yesterday Tomorrow," Elvis pounds the skins mercilessly as Johnny Million gives the power chord his all. With j.a.c.k.i.e. thumping hard, and Chloe's precise, rapid fire delivery (complete with Belinda Carlisle's trademark growl), the song soars along at high speed. In sharp contrast, "Sister Mary" begins with a look back toward Abbey Road. J's bass handles the plunk & drop right there with George Harrison, and although you may think "She Said" is right around the corner, Orwell takes it in a different direction.

With "Hooked On The Girl," a bit of early Pat Benatar sneaks through, but without Benatar's (or rather Neil Gerald's) sterile arrangements. Fresh is the word, as the background chorus fills in with "I know, we know, she knows, he knows, yeah..." while Orwell alternately coos and cackles a separate lead vocal. The cute and clever "Colorado Coastline," continues on the same vein, but with "Clouds Come Over The Mountain," a winsome, pleading side shines through. Jangling guitars and superb vocals blend in a rock ballad full of lessons, questions, and well, musical hooks. Again, the background vocals put icing on the cake.

Million's mastery of the tuneful power-chord melody line continues with "I Don't Like You." Believe me, if there's a reason the album grows on you so quickly, it's because of songs like this. There are so many musical twists and turns that every corner yields a new

reward. "I Don't Like You" has more bridges than the Hudson, and every one of them is worth a mint! Buried two-thirds of the way into it is a musical duel between j.a.c.k.i.e. and Johnny Millier that'll blow you away. And with "Rita Girl," a touch of distortion on Orwell's vocal adds even more punch to lines like, "she told her boyfriend go fuck off and die." And believe it or not, all this and great musical sensibility, too! Clearly above average in every way, this is a group worth watching. Solid, sure, and full of surprises, a spin in the world of Big Hello will keep you coming back for more.

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Sometimes I wonder to myself, "where the Hell is Randy California when you need him?" I know Spirit has made an attempt or two at a comeback, but has never come up with anything to update or supersede the stature and legacy of *The Twelve Dreams of Dr. Sardonicus*. No matter, because now I have The Time Beings, and the legacy can finally carry on!

With two- and three-part harmonies which some have compared to Off Broadway and Cheap Trick (allow me to add Crowded House and XTC), the sound is intricate and complex, driven by drummer Tony Gaette, guitarist/vocalist/songwriter Jon Raleigh, and Bassist/vocalist/songwriter Steve Granstrom. This West Suburban Trio has been cranking out artful noise for five years now, and with *Lemonade*, their second album for Red Dog, I can assure you there is no sophomore slump. Check out the unbelievable, thoroughly original bass-line intro on "Digging Into My Brain," not to mention the piercing lyric, "It's all a dream, don't fool yourself, you've got no soul to sell." But lyrical quote doesn't do this song justice -- you can even dance to it (I'm chair dancing as I type). And the in-your-face vocals are complete with lustrous harmonic precision including a distant "yeah" reminiscent of Black Francis. Might as well add Pixies fans to this band's legion of admirers. And it doesn't end there.

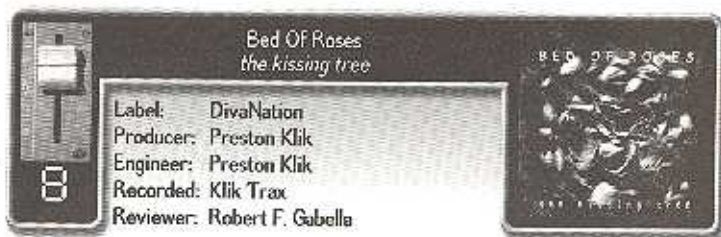
Track after track of riveting guitar, pounding rhythm, and outstanding vocals will greet the eager listener. "Feeling Fine" is a funky, unapologetic ode to a respectful, slightly voyeuristic dose of admiration, while "Terrorize" is a jazzy reflection on all those relationships, or non-relationships, that passed before. The Time Beings have an intimate grasp of bridges, time changes, and counter rhythms, and every new spin of this disc brings new rewards to even a casual listener.

The title cut, "Lemonade," is a high-speed romp across the frets, with a reflective lyric that takes a stab at analyzing the

rewards and pitfalls of small business, but of course, in relation to the larger game of life. "On rainy days, I sell lemonade, business is slow/ I sit in the stands, I make it by hand, still nobody shows/ I lowered my price, I advertise, I spent my last dime/ The first cup is free, the second's on me." And on "Cut and Dry," we get a touch of Kurt Cobain in the vocal approach, but once again the bridges distinguish the track from any sort of run-of-the-mill grunge tribute.

If you're looking to get beyond your musical rut, *Lemonade* is what you've been craving. These are songs that will move you both musically and emotionally, not to mention physically, so get off your ass and dance!

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The kissing tree gets off to a slow start with "In The Air, That Is My Mind," but you soon come to realize that this is the whole idea. After you leave your caffeine buzz at the door, along with your shoes and perhaps even your clothes, you have a much better feel for what this disc is all about.

As "Melting The Heart Of The Stone Buddha" gets underway, you either choose to surrender or pull the disc in favor of something snappier. I chose to surrender. And why not? *Bed of Roses* starts out with Preston Klik as host to a group of friends who wander in and out of the various tracks with neighborly abandon. You're sure to enjoy Char Cole Malley's exuberant violin on "The Merry Spinster" as well as Amy Fina's distorted acoustic guitar on "Wax Moon." On "It Glows In My Hand," the album's unexpected dance track, the chant of Rupert Chestswami weaves in and out of Klik's samples as The Immortal Sevani's psycho-cowboy rap (a la Butthole Surfers) appears and disappears. Farred Haque turns in some awesome picking on the star-guitar as the whole thing comes to a boil. The title cut follows, and is a simple, stirring combination of piano, cello, samples, and vocal treatments. Due to the provenance of a summer storm during the recording, Klik groups three of the tracks together as the "Thunder Suite." On "The Ghost of Mr. Muir," Laura Good's cello opens the procession, Lisa Fever's flute kicks in along with Yvonne Bruner's vocal sighs, and Klik begins a vague reprise of the title song's melody, this time in a major key without half-tones. All in all, a pleasant concoction.

The kissing tree will likely be called background music by many, but the blend is a sophisticated melody of sounds, storms, and street noise which is worthy of a more careful listen. But if it helps you do the dishes, then let it. After all, music sets the mood, and if you're climbing the walls from a hard day at work, then what better way to relax?

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