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**JANSEN**

## Records

### The Stranglers Off the Beaten Track WEA

Nearly 10 years ago the ugly machismo that was the Stranglers was mistaken for a healthy sex drive creatively channelled through some sorta positive punk aggression. In other words the pelvic thrust of the first side of *Rattus Norvegicus*, the pertinent Doors-ish comment of the title track from *No More Heroes* and bits and pieces from *Black and White* had marginally more brain than cock.

Still, as the reverse sleeve of *Off the Beaten Track* reminds us, the Stranglers have released 10 albums and 25 singles. No mean feat for a band of such limited imagination and innovation. And yet they have (had) fans, a fact no doubt influential in the release of this album of scattered debris in the shape of B-sides.

Reminiscing again and back in 1977 the Stranglers were tipped as being a great jukebox band with the release of singles like 'Get a Grip on Yourself' and 'Something Better Change'. There's scant evidence of that on B-side R&B send-ups like 'Go Buddy Go' and 'Old Codger' or on spaced-out suburban trips like 'Love 30'. And they're the only band who could make Bacharach-David's 'Walk on By' sound like 'Fuckin' Piss Off'. Aah, the beauties of subtlety, not one of the Stranglers' strong points.

George Kay

### Big Country The Seer Mercury

Just be tolerant for a minute and the music from the likes of Big Country, U2, the Waterboys, Cactus World News etc. can be seen as a legitimate attempt at clawing above the grimness of Thatcher's Britain. The body has to put up with shit, so let's enshrine the spirit in music larger than mere existence. It's a plausible apology for bands who've hardly shared a good review amongst them in the last couple of years.

Big Country have always had their hearts in the right place; straight from the Skids, Stewart Adamson has made a fair fist of leading the band through a marriage of Celtic longing and conventional guitar-rock gusto. Advance promotion suggested that *The Seer* was to be something different from *The Crossing* and *Steeltown*, but unless you count Kate Bush's backing vocals on the title track, the album follows the same pattern as its predecessors. Which is not a bad thing, especially when the band takes off on 'The Red Fox' and 'The Sailor' and produces a riff that Hank Marvin would've been proud of on 'The Teacher'.

But any case Big Country makes musically is shot full of holes by lyrics that struggle to be even bad poetry. Titles like those above and 'Remembrance Day' and 'I Walk the Hill' lead into images of "your raven hair," "bells will ring" and couplets like "the sky was rolling blindly on / the daylight had not gone." Sincere but real gauche. And to advertise the fact, they always include a lyric sheet.

Still, if you can regard the vocal as merely another instrument and leave the lyric sheet to charity, Big Country are still pumping out an acceptable formula of escapism.

George Kay

### The Axemen Three Virgins, Three Versions, Three Visions Flying Nun Little Stevie McCabe Sweat it Out Sleek Bott

Wow! They're jes' the awesomeest. The Axemen — teen geniuses and tape-makers, now become the Axemen — visionaries (three of 'em) and double-album-makers. Awesome again! Brilliant, shambolic, shifting sands of time, altered consciousness in space, 22 hits! Wow again!

Sometimes the ideas on *Three Virgins* are fully developed, other times they just meander to an end, but the best of the hits here make for *trés, trés* interesting and enjoyable listening.

Steve McCabe's straining larynx takes hold of most of the songs, the piano-dominated ballad 'Effectively My Baby' being the most wonderful, stressful exertion. McCabe pens most of the songs, with a few Bob Branigan numbers thrown in as well. Branigan's music is more tangential than McCabe's on *Three Virgins*, his 'Think About Me' stands out on side three.

The Axemen's vision is a sprawling, shambolic twist on rock'n'roll. Many friends and associates have assisted them, providing Strat solos, screams, yells and a billion extra geetars, some of which are lost and go credited as "unknown: sax maniac sings etc."

Little Stevie's LP *Sweat it Out*, recorded in a Christchurch garage, is a rather different affair. As with many other independent solo albums, things get a bit ditty-ish (26 hits on one LP!), a little bit like the Residents, but his singing is more controlled than before ... songs like 'Clues to a Dream' sound pretty damn good actually. And 'Crazy' — penned by M Baldwin, K Barlow, D Barlow, T Barlow and M Riley ... well, um ...

Both these records show us something of Christchurch's do-it-yourself underbelly, and what's more, they're both (especially the double album) a wild an' fun listen. Little Stevie McCabe's LP is available from Sleek Bott, PO Box 2764, Christchurch, for \$10.50, and *Three Virgins* ... is distributed by Flying Nun. Check 'em out.

Paul McKessar

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