

Records

Last Man Down This Sporting Life Ode

The emergence of singer-songwriter Ross Mullins, the Last Man Down, was hailed as an event last year. The LP *State House Kid* revealed a talent that determinedly reflected its New Zealand identity. Ross Mullins was a writer with something to say, and it was about us. *This Sporting Life* continues the same theme, and the result is an insightful collection of portraits and images of Godzone remarkably similar in scope and tone to Randy Newman's master work about the American South, *Good Old Boys*.

Mullins has a wry sense of observation, sardonic but sympathetic, and a delicate melodic touch. The music recalls the light jazz pop feel of *State House Kid*, and Last Man Down have become more assured as a unit. The production has the same elegant clarity, the arrangements are once again adept and witty. The main development from *State House*

Kid is a musical confidence; unfortunately Mullins's voice is still the weak spot in what is otherwise a strong musical package. For much of the record however, the classy musicians compensate for the anaemic vocals; Mullins himself is a fine piano player, particularly when he leaves the cocktail sound of an electric piano for the real thing.

The songs are of a consistent quality, and packed full of delightful images we can all recognise from the homogenous bulk of New Zealand society. Mullins is often content to let the images speak for themselves, as in the rugby and racing vignettes in 'Night of the Test' and 'Scratchings.' Sometimes this works, particularly in 'Standard Three,' with its many scenes painting a detailed picture of a New Zealand childhood: bikesheds, bullrush, creeks and cornflakes, 'Lost in the lupins, a mythical land where a boy can shanghai the moon after bedtime.' Occasionally, a little more is needed to make the point. 'Night of the Test' could do with a similar twist to 'Pinehead's' to lift it above mere commentary. 'The Mating of a Rating and a Wren' is a little gem. The story of a perfect match a la Lorraine and Murray, its

strong melody is assisted by lovely horns arranged by Chris Green; on 'Standard Three' there's more evocative horn-playing with Mike Russell's 'Shipbuilding'-like flugelhorn.

Mullins and his Last Men Down are craftsmen; he writes memorable melodies and intelligent, accessible lyrics. Occasionally the music can be a bit too crafted, so considered and careful that a feeling of warmth or spontaneity is missing, but with *This Sporting Life* Ross Mullins has made another significant contribution to the New Zealand music catalogue. With his nuggets of Kiwi life, he is giving us us.

Chris Bourke

The Undertones Cher O'Bowlies EMI

Sub-titled "Featuring Feargal Sharkey," this is basically a re-decoration of The Undertones' singles' album *All Wrapped Up* with added album tracks and a reminder, for those ignorant of the band, that Sharkey's music didn't start with 'A Good Heart,' although his decline did.

This record company marketing strategy provides a further excuse to re-assess the glorious and gor-

geous pop that whistled from Derry 1978-83; music directly descended from the flawless bloodline of the Ramones and the Buzzcocks. As a fast-track through their finest, *Cher O'Bowlies* is a treat. The O'Neills' genius still lingers in singles like Jimmy, Jimmy, 'Here Comes the Summer' (the summer song and written in sunny Northern Ireland f'Chris-sake), 'It's Going to Happen' and 'Julie Ocean.'

All of the above are on *All Wrapped Up*, but it's in its wise selection of album additives that *Cher O'Bowlies* really justifies itself. Present is 'Tearproof,' one of a quartet beginning with 'Boys Will Be Boys' that made the second side of *Hypnotised* the bee's knees. And 'See That Girl,' from the same album, was a warning of serious intentions that led to the quietly shattering 'You're Welcome' and 'Forever Paradise' from *Positive Touch*, and later to the heart-rending 'Love Before Romance' from the magnificent *Sin of Pride*.

Yep, life is a bowl of cherries and just remember that the O'Neills' music didn't start with That Petrol Emotion's 'Keen.'

George Kay

Bob Marley and the Wailers Rebel Music Island

The *Legend* compilation of 1984 told only half the Bob Marley story, representing the statesman and the lover. A second volume was essential to capture the revolutionary, and this is it.

As with all compilations, the reviewer becomes as subjective as the person who had the final say on the track listing. Presumably that person was Chris Blackwell, with the tacit approval of Rita Marley, who retains rigid control over her late common law husband's estate. It has to be fairly said that with these two LPs, you could successfully introduce a creature from Mars to the genius who was Robert Nesta Marley.

The only subjective question I can raise about *Rebel Music's* track-listing is the inclusion of 'Roots,' the B-side of 'Waiting in Vain' and, in this company, a B-side song. Why not 'Burning and Looting,' one of the toughest Wailers songs of all? It would have been far more in keeping with the general atmosphere. No other gripes, however. The title track's lyrical punch has survived the test

of time and a Paul Smykle remix, while 'So Much Trouble' and 'Rat Race' have a timeless visionary quality. 'Them Belly Full' remains as poetically simple as its title, while 'War/No More Trouble' and 'Get Up, Stand Up' are included in their live versions, to give them the historical perspective as the anthems they became. The package is completed with 'Slave Driver' from *Catch a Fire*, 'Crazy Baldhead' from *Rastaman Vibration* and 'Ride Natty Ride' from *Survival*.

The annoying aspect of all this is that there's quite a stack of unreleased Marley material still sitting in the vaults of Island Records. Whether it's tied up there by legal problems or record company politics, only Chris Blackwell can answer. I've heard one track, an outtake from *Natty Dread* called 'I'm a Do You,' where Marley and the I-Threes get very mellow. It's at least as good as anything on the *Confrontation* set and would surely sell a bundle if released.

These still-unheard tracks complete the Bob Marley story, and their time must surely come. Soon come ...

Duncan Campbell

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