



Brian Wilson



Ian Curtis, Joy Division

manages to get into a couple of topical bitches. The eight-minute anti-war 'When Duty Calls' leaves teeth marks and the anti-nuke 'Up There Down There' makes a convincing snarl but the only other non-personal song, 'People Have The Power' is too naive to make it.

After *Horses* Patti Smith struggled to recapture that X-factor. These days she's wise enough not to try — rock'n'roll takes the back seat. Approach *Dream Of Life* and its balance of personal insights and politics from that perspective and you'll find that she's aged well.

GEORGE KAY

**TONI CHILDS
Union
(A&M)**

The late 80s will be remembered for music more sales-orientated than ever. We live with the fastest media in history and as soon as something new is spotted it's stamped, labelled and shipped out fast.

Trouble is, the massive ego that opposes fashion often ends up talking loud and saying nothing, and the

self-consciously alternative can likewise end up a kneejerk reactionary with little to say in the way of music.

With *Union*, however, Toni Childs has managed to find her own voice and her own music with scarcely a nod to others. *Union* fills its own space and makes its own rules, yet there's very little ego on the album at all.

Instead, not unlike the Cocteau Twins, Childs has embraced the layers and atmospheres which the studio can create. She is no luddite and together with producers David Tickle and David Ricketts has picked up on the pseudo-ethnic grooves that move Peter Gabriel and (sometimes) Eno.

Songs like 'Walk And Talk Like Angels' and 'Zimbabwe' loop themselves into harmonies and rhythms of startling depth and emotion. Toni Childs is 30, which I like; there's maturity here, and heart — even if it is on her sleeve. There's also a rare character in her voice, the strongest instrument on the album.

Childs is an LA. woman and that city's infamous naivety may catch up with her by the second album, but on *Union* it's a

benefit. Her singing and her songs are passionate and melancholy; she is not shy about what she feels. There is none of Suzanne Vega's infuriating coyness and Childs doesn't dip into Tracy Chapman's righteous bleating, even on political subjects. Childs is empty at the right times, letting the music say things for her.

So, what box shall we put her in? Phoebe Snow sings Peter Gabriel? The comparisons are not invalid, but they fall way short. *Union* is a testimony to heart and intelligence, to instinct and careful self-management. At this point in time it sounds like the sort of debut that is really gonna shake the earth, but that couldn't be. Best female artist? Nope, she's better than most of the men around at the moment as well.

So let's just opt for the same old recommendation you always read: give Toni Childs a listen. Because *Union* is an album you should hear before the media spoils it for you. Because it really is quite remarkably beautiful.

CHAD TAYLOR

**BRIAN WILSON
Brian Wilson
(Sire/Reprise)**

Brian Wilson was the lost boy of rock'n'roll. The first composer/performer/producer all-rounder, his work with the Beach Boys defined the Californian myth in the early 60s. 'Good Vibrations' was his masterpiece, pop's perfect three-and-a-half minute symphony. He then embarked on the legendary concept album *Smile*, which was abandoned after drug abuse brought out the paranoia and insecurity in Wilson's troubled personality. The Beach Boys paddled on while Wilson became a hermit, coming out of his seclusion in the mid-80s after years of controversial analysis with his svengali psychotherapist Eugene Landy.

Landy is crucial to the appearance of this solo album, which comes out 22 years after Wilson's last significant work. He's the "executive producer," and is thanked by Wilson for saving his life; apparently Wilson cannot operate on a daily basis without constant supervision from Landy. The helpful shrink is also credited as co-composer on almost half the album's 11 tracks.

So that's the weird background, and the miracle of it all is that this comeback record is a stunner. The hook-filled melodies are heart-breakingly delicate, with a strange naive quality that suggests Wilson has never left his adolescence. He's also never lost his love for Spectorian layered production.

At first the album seems like "Variations in Beach Boy Minor," or Todd Rundgren pastiches, but the strength of the songs and Wilson's singing means this isn't the technical exercise the dozens of engineers listed might suggest.

The aching 'Love and Mercy', the nursery rhyme-like 'Walkin' the Line' and 'Little Children', and the plaintive 'Let it Shine' portray Wilson as a pathetic, lonely figure of humour and soul. 'Rio Grande' is the album's showcase, a witty eight-minute exploration of popular music, along the lines of his former colleague Van Dyke Parks' *Discover America*. From 'Cow Cow Boogie' to 'Ole Man River', Huck Finn to Fred Astaire, Wilson pulls it all off with taste and irony.

Brian Wilson overcame daunting personal obstacles to make this album (unlike Robbie Robertson, say, who had the same megabuck backing, but only had to fight his ego and laziness). That

the results sound so fresh and alive to a palate jaded by over-production is the best surprise this year. Now all we need is for Syd Barrett to return from the living dead...

CHRIS BOURKE

**PUBLIC ENEMY
If Takes A Nation Of Millions To
Hold Us Back
(CBS)**

Yeeah! Boys! Bass for your face. The album that asks no favours, takes no prisoners and makes everything that came before it redundant. Hip-hop taken to the edge, at its rawest, like a dentist's drill, it makes you take notice. The most self-contained work of black consciousness since Coltrane, a torrent of blackness against a white world.

A product of Long Island's black working class subdivisions, followers of Louis Farrakhan and the nation of Islam. Many call them racists but they answer with 'Don't Believe The Hype'; *Used*, *abused with clues/I refused to blow a fuse/They even had it on the news/Don't believe the hype!*

I don't expect many white liberals — with bones around their necks will hear this (too busy with Tracy Chapman talkin' about a revolution). If they did, it would scare the liberal guilt right out of them. Each track a seminar on how to party for your right to fight. Militant raps on blacks in prison ('Black Steel In The Hour Of Chaos'), drugs ('Night Of The Living Bassheads'), failure of black radio to hard core ('Bring The Noise') and the merits of their DJ featured strongly on 'Terminator X To The Edge Of Panic' where he cuts up Queen's 'Flash' theme. Excellent use of samples throughout, from James Brown, *Shaff*, crowd response, politics and Hagens' 'Harlem Nocturne'.

Eighteen tracks of tension, ideologically, lyrically and musically. The use of unusual tonal structures and Chuck D and flavour flav rapping style add to the tension, also the use of a siren makes things alienating. It's as if the added noises make you listen to the lyrics more. It's the same effect Maceo and the Maceo use on 'Cross The Tracks' and 'Blow Your Head' — it's part of hip-hop history.

The track 'Party For Your Right To Fight' is about black political groupings, like the Black Panthers of Huey P. Newton, Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Seale. It was a great shock to me when I found Seale's latest book — a recipe book for barbeque sauce. How the mighty have been beaten. But as Public

Enemy say on that track, "He ended it — so get up/Time to get 'em back — you got it/Get back on the track — you got it/Word from the honorable Elijah Muhammed/Know who you are to be black."

An unbelievably strong album that can never be beaten. A masterpiece. KERRY BUCHANAN

**JOY DIVISION
Substance
(Factory)**

Great myths of rock and roll No.237: "Joy Division's music is depressing." The uninitiated espouse this belief worldwide, making the same mistake as they did with Leonard Cohen. Joy Division dealt with death, loss and alienation, and critics pretended, both in condemnation and defence of the band, that this was new subject matter.

They were called morbid, but while morbidity suggests a fetishistic obsession with things unpleasant, Ian Curtis tackled pain head-on in his lyrics and sometimes violent stage act. What could be less morbid than a superbly executed exorcism of pain, an instant catharsis in an imperfect life? It could be said that the really depressing "artists" are everyone from Nick Kamen to Bon Jovi; there is certainly something wearying about their popularity.

There have been accusations that Factory are only releasing old Joy Division material to make a quick buck, but if this is so (and given Tony Wilson's track record, it's unlikely) then this is the acceptable face of avarice, as *Substance* is a great compilation (no, that's not a contradiction in terms. Well, not any more, anyway).

The "where is my favourite track" brigade will have limitless ammunition with *Substance*. There is nothing from *Unknown Pleasures* or *Closer*, and most of side one is given to very raw early material. All three singles are there, though, as is a wonderfully sparse 'She's Lost Control' from the B-side of 'Atmosphere'. This diversity of material will no doubt cause many to wonder at the fact that the same band recorded the jagged punk aggression of 'Warsaw' and the almost lulling melancholy of 'Atmosphere', often said to be Joy Division's masterpiece.

There's something reassuring in the way that after all these years, Joy Division can still tear us apart. MATTHEW WHYLAND

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