



Renee Geyer

back beat

GLADYS KNIGHT Just for You (MCA)

Gladys Knight is Aretha's equal as a vocalist, without the grande dame's insecurities. She's still at the cutting edge of modern soul, and her voice just keeps maturing like vintage port. This has a big studio sound, with productions by Jam and Lewis, Babyface, Rhett Lawrence and Bebe Winans, but for once the variety of producers doesn't affect consistency. Gladys purrs through ballads and dance-floor smooches, with a backing band of exquisite taste and feel. Highlights include tributes to Curtis Mayfield and Boyz II Men. (Who says real songs aren't being written anymore? asks Gladys.)

RENEE GEYER Difficult Woman (Larrikin)

Aussie chanteuse Geyer has one of the great white soul voices: smokey, with depth, control and a slight croak. Appropriately she's sponsored by J&B whiskey and produced by Paul Kelly. Almost cabaret soul, sometimes contrivedly noir, Geyer is best when the material equals her voice: ie, when she leaves the writing to Kelly ('Careless', 'Foggy Highway') or

Beach Boy Brian Wilson (her version of 'God Only Knows' is magnificent). The LA band has more technique than flair, but this will suit when it's getting late, you're drinking top shelf, and you want one more for your baby and one more for the road.

TINSLEY ELLIS Storm Warning (Alligator)

Whereas Blues Traveller are white boys playing at the blues, Alligator veteran Ellis has the natural feel of one who's grown up with it. His voice has body, his rhythm section deftly changes dynamics, and Ellis never loses sight of the song. The choice of covers (Freddie King, Jimmy Reed, Junior Wells) tells its own story.

DIANE SCHUUR & B B KING Heart to Heart (GRP)

As a country gentleman, B B King stands back and holds the door open for Diane Schuur, New York cabaret-jazz canary. She has a sophisticated, if brassy, voice - against his lived-in soul - but this is more of an even match than, say, Ray Charles and Cleo Laine doing *Porgy & Bess*. B B may sing as if his tux

is a little tight, but the sheer class of the Phil Ramone production carries it off; the arrangements are slick but not without soul. They cover standards, some by Uncle Ray, with a moving (ie, faithful) version of Aretha's 'Spirit in the Dark'.

BLUES TRAVELLER Four (A&M)

We can play it fast, we can play it slow - we can play da blooze. Traveller play very retro white blues-rock; they could be from the bottom of the bill at the Fillmore West, circa 1968. Frontman John Popper drives the frenetic band with his equally frenetic (and annoyingly squeaky) blues harp. Compared to the sloppy pop of the Spin Doctors, or the studied rootsiness of Counting Crows, Blues Traveller are the real thing, man, like a heavier Traffic. There's nothing wrong with their playing, but nothing interesting either.

RAY WYLIE HUBBARD Loco Gringo's Lament (Dejadisc)

An Austin singer-songwriter when the Texas town was in its mid-70s heyday, Hubbard's only lucrative credit is for Jerry Jeff Walker's hit 'Up Against the Wall Redneck Mother'. But his talent goes far deeper; here we have 12 evocative songs, all of them different, and all captivating. Hubbard plays like an angel but has a face like 50 miles of gravel road - and he's found plenty of yarns on the way. This has surprising variety, from folky finger-picking to Steve Earle honky tonk, with plenty of space for Hubbard's assured vocals (Merle Haggard meets Sid Selvidge). He also has a great way with opening lines ('Christopher turned 16 in a chemical dependency wing ...').

GREG BROWN The Poet Game (Red House/Global Routes)

Prolific Midwest singer-songwriter Brown is like Townes Van Zandt with more zing, or James McMurtry if he'd achieved his promise. Brown's music is subtle, with a mix of feels, and his lyrics are unstudied and believable: unromantic situations and details of Americana. The excellent songs are moving but not without humour (contemporary folk need not be earnest or preachy), clever but not smart alec. 'Jesus & Elvis' in particular is masterly: 'Jesus had some water, said: "Wine'd be better yet" / Elvis picked up a guitar, and made all the women wet.'

JAMES BOOKER

albums



Kurt Cobain

NIRVANA Unplugged In New York (Geffen)

Well it wasn't enough for Kurt to shoot himself, he also had to commit an even bigger sin and do an unplugged session (this seems to bother some people), just like Eric Clapton and... whoever else it was that did unplugged stuff.

Bully, bully to that. This is an unplugged record by a band that knows how to write some of the best rock on the planet, and how to convert their songs into beautiful, powerful acoustic versions. Kurt's voice is in top form. It flows from his lips in perfect, unique Cobain form. It's pure emotion. It's real.

The record consists of half Nirvana songs and half covers, including Eugene Kelly's 'Jesus Doesn't Want Me For A Sunbeam', which has bassist Krist Novoselic playing warped church organ sounding keyboards, and 'The Man Who Sold the World', which Kurt does great justice to - it's a fantastic, melodic piece and possibly the most moving on the album. The Meat Puppets join Nirvana to play versions of Meat Puppets songs 'Oh Me', 'Plateau' and 'Lake of Fire', and Leadbelly's 'Where Did You Sleep Last Night'.

Nirvana are one of the few bands who actually have rock songs full of melody, therefore their songs are just as powerful and moving when done acoustically, simply in a quieter, more serene way. This allows the beauty and uniqueness of Kurt's voice to shine through possibly even more powerfully than it does on the 'rock' versions of the songs. 'Pennyroyal Tea' is the best example, being just Kurt and his guitar. If Kurt and Nirvana's music meant

