



CHIXDIGGIT!
Moss Elixir
(Warners)

Maverick English eccentric Robyn Hitchcock's last album *Respect* was, by his own high standards, something of a creative cul-de-sac. With *Moss Elixir*, his first album for Warners, Hitchcock returns to the sparse sound of his landmark first solo LP, *I Often Dream Of Trains* (without a doubt, one of the great, undiscovered albums of the 1980s). Like that album (and its spiritual successor, *Eye*), the skeletal arrangements of *Moss Elixir* help throw Hitchcock's song writing into sharper relief, which is no bad thing, for his songs have rarely sounded better than they do here. Hitchcock's keen sense of melody remains intact, while his lyrics continue to be as absurd as a *Melrose Place* story line and twice as funny.

On a number of tracks the violin of Deni Bonet provides a sympathetic foil to Hitchcock's own underrated guitar playing and fragile singing, but Hitchcock doesn't play it all low key. One listen to the pristine guitar pop of 'Alright, Yeah' will leave you wondering how he hasn't sold albums by the million and isn't packing punters into stadiums worldwide. Then 'Filthy Bird' arrives, and you realise why — imagine a medieval folk song played on an electric guitar, with Hitchcock intoning merrily in the chorus, 'Oooh, a happy bird is a filthy bird.' You can almost hear the sphincter muscles of anally retentive radio programmers snapping shut. Which is not to say that 'Filthy Bird' is a lesser song — far from it. It's just another example of Hitchcock's penchant for the wilfully bizarre, further evidence of a desire to follow his own path, no matter how far off the beaten track it may be. And Hitchcock wanders far and wide on *Moss Elixir*. Indeed, the only occasion where the album is anything less than inspired is when Hitchcock is following the musical straight and narrow, as on the Robyn-by-numbers rocker 'Beautiful Queen'. Elsewhere his arcane spirit runs rampant, showering

the listener with utterly compelling music of rare brilliance, mixed with unblinking perversity. Essential.

MARTIN BELL

GOLDFINGER
Goldfinger
(Mojo)

Although this release heralds the arrival of Goldfinger into the album stakes, there's something about them that suggests they've been around for a while. Maybe it's the fact that they are down this way to support the seriously old school Sex Pistols, or perhaps it's because they sound closer to the original punk sound than a lot of the new punk/pop bands around at the moment. Whatever the case, Goldfinger's release sounds much more assured and experienced than you'd expect from a punk band's debut.

The sound is predominantly fast and furious, but they do occasionally mix up the punk with delicate dabs of ska — although never for the course of a whole song. Like hyperactive schoolboys, Goldfinger can't seem to keep still for more than a minute before it's back into what feels right — going at it hell for leather. The bass, courtesy of New Zealander Simon Williams, positively thumps. The album's packed with foot-stomping anthems. 'Anxiety', 'King for a Day' and the first single, 'Here in Your Bedroom', are all sure to be favourites in the front of the mosh pit.

The only aspect which lets this album



Billy Bragg

down is the lyrics, which are occasionally comical, but usually just plain dumb. The humour continues onto one of the two unlisted bonus tracks hooked on the end of the album. In a Jerky Boys-style phone conversation, a wannabe drummer applies for a job in the band. It's very funny stuff — but, just like the Jerky Boys, only for a few listens.

Goldfinger claim to be most comfortable when pumping their songs out on stage, and consequently found it tough putting the songs down in the studio. That's no surprise. It's not hard to imagine these songs sounding pretty damn fine when played both live and loud.

DOMINIC WAGHORN

BABBLE
Ether
(Reprise)

Anyone who managed to miss Babble's debut album, *The Stone*, could almost be forgiven for thinking the ex-Thompson Twins have jumped on the chill-out zone bandwagon of these mildly acid crazy days, and not quite managed the leap, leaving one leg dangling in the pool of their past pop-sensibilities with *Ether*. Perhaps it's just that Tom Bailey's voice has remained so inextricably tied with people's memories of the 80s — not a bad thing if you were a pop kid like me, but get over it already. The reason I say 'almost forgiven' is really just my generosity, for such radical progressions in sound must be allowed to fight their battles alone, and if you missed *The Stone* but welcomed any hipper ambient waves, you're a fashion victim who doesn't deserve the even break you reserve from others. While I sit home and worry about pressing questions like, will the next U2 album be jungle? (stop press, I've just been informed it will be trip-hop), Babble soothe my heart about that which is right in following your own instincts and not trying to compete with the outside world.

This is the perfect loner's album, even if there happens to be two of you. Try uttering words like, 'I saw the sun tonight,' when you pop into your nearest cocktail lounge for a pre-dawn and see what sort of reception you get; some things are only meant for sharing intimately.

BRONWYN TRUDGEON

CHIXDIGGIT!
Chixdiggit!
(Sub Pop)

Straight outta Calgary! Negative points for political correctness, Chixdiggit! are cartoon rock, dumber than the Ramones, challenging the Hard

Ons for the crown of bike shed sexual sniggering. Sub Pop's newest dunkers (short for dumb punkers) save themselves from the bargain bin by one thin element of humour, self-parody, and their ability to write very catchy pop tunes. Where the Hard Ons' version of self-parody was just a thin veneer of credibility over what we all know is 'Australian' culture, Chix have the authentic touch on 'I Wanna Hump You', 'Toilet Seat's Coming Down' and 'Shadowy Bangers From A Shadowy Duplex'. The Ramones are the Klown Princes of three chord thrash, but here Chix throw serious clouds over their now sad parade with 'Henry Rollins Is No Fun' and the infectious 'Hemp Hemp Hooray'. Put Chixdiggit! next to the Angry Samoans and I'd say you'd have the ideal bookends on dumb punk.

MAC HODGE

THROWING MUSES
Limbo
(4AD)

The Throwing Muses' seventh album brings confirmation that their three now-permanent members have a comfortable working relationship going. It shows although this band is — and always has been — driven by Hersh, Throwing Muses is now probably more of a 'group' than it has ever been (including the early days when Tanya Donnelly played second fiddle to 'Hersh'). On *Limbo* the rhythm section is more than just a backing band. Often songs are structured round Narcizo's drumming patterns or Georges' relaxed bass style, but mostly it's everything else sitting in behind Hersh's unique voice. Whether on the happy-go-lucky pop of 'Ruthie's Knocking' and the album's first single, 'Shark', or on the delicate darker tunes like 'Mr Bones', Hersh releases her cryptic lines in a way which sounds both beautiful and haunting.

On 'Serene' a cello is used — an effect which has been used earlier by Hersh on her solo project *Hips and Makers*. Otherwise the sound is minimalist and the production clear and simple. Effects aren't part of the Muses' feel these days — it's a case of putting the songs at the front, letting them live or die on their own. Mostly on *Limbo* they live, and will go on living with continued listenings.

As a total entity, *Limbo* may not be as together and complete as the band's previous effort, but this is only because all Throwing Muses albums take a while to grow on most listeners. Give the songs time to work their odd rhythms and strange tunes into your ears, and in time it'll all make sense.

The only unanswered question lies with the title. Throwing Muses don't at all appear to be in limbo; today they sound more together and directed than they have in a long while.

DOMINIC WAGHORN

ALICE IN CHAINS
MTV Unplugged
(Columbia)

Yeah, I know, the *Unplugged* concept has become the most legitimate stop-gap since the 'Greatest Hits' album was invented — and we all saw Layne Staley make the cover of the *Rolling Stone* for reasons other than his musical output recently. And it's hard to think of a lot to say about the effect it has on most bands — apart from playing Count the Vocal Catch (check 'No Excuses'), analysing the band's between-song banter (Layne sounds genuinely humbled and happy to be here), and expressing annoyance at another audience who won't shut up and let the band get on with it (32 seconds of dick-sucking before even a note is struck here, another minute-two seconds before they pull back and close their mouths on the visual gag of cheering the band in *one by one*).

Anyway, the results of unplugging Alice in Chains don't require too large a stretch of the imagination, particularly (and obviously) in the case of the *Jar of Flies* material. Nevertheless, this album works across the board because Alice in Chains have always had some subtly reflective material, that, at the times it was needed most, sounded better when you muted the vocals quietly through your head than it did when you were forced to hear it cranked up to 11 with visual accompaniment by a bunch of pissed bogans playing air guitar in some back-of-beyond bar from the wrong side of David Lynchville. 'Down in the Hole', 'Would?', 'Heaven Beside You', 'Angry Chair' and 'Rooster' are the strongest cases in point here. The result is music you can listen to in your flannel night-shirt, instead of your flannel workshirt — the sorta grunge your granny wouldn't mind you thrashing.

BRONWYN TRUDGEON

SUBLIME
Sublime
(Gasoline Alley)

Hang around the South Bay of Los Angeles (where Sublime hail from) and you'll hear all manner of music — rap, punk, reggae, ska — all blast in little 10-second bursts from cars cruising to and from the beach. Sublime obviously have the same listening patterns, as you can hear all this and a little more going on in

every song they do. Ska beats chop into punk riffing, there's hip-hop beats all over the place, and some great examples of bad white-boy toasting, and this is not a bad thing. The album (their third — the first two were local indie releases) has a consistent groove, probably due in part to Butthole Surfer Paul Leary's hand in the production, and the music mix and smart-ass sense of humour make for a nice vibe. It's a summer album, but not a lazy, mellow-out album — more a relaxing before heading out for trouble/fun sort of deal.

KIRK GEE

BILLY BRAGG
William Bloke
(Mushroom)

After an extended leave of absence Billy Bragg's priorities have changed, but his ability to write good songs remains. The uncommonly long delay of four years between albums was partly due to a bad dose of appendicitis, but more because of the birth of his first child. There's no doubting parenthood has mellowed Bragg — he's more reflective than ever and for maybe the first time in his career, the softy songs are beginning to outnumber the militant numbers. The general mood of the album is more about what's happening closer to home, and more positive.

Almost all of *William Bloke* sees Bragg accompanied by either the full band or at least by his long-time keyboard player Cara Tivey. There are a couple of tracks where Bragg settles for the basic man-and-guitar style, and on one of these, 'A Pict Song' — which matches some piercing bare-bones Bragg guitar with a Rudyard Kipling poem — the effect is spine tingling.

The album as a whole is a mixed bag not only in terms of style, but also in hits and misses. About three quarters is classic Bragg fare, with intelligent, warm and humorous lyrics put to perfect arrangement. The rest, well... maybe they're going to be growers, but I doubt it. The falsetto on 'Sugardaddy' just doesn't work; Bragg is best when half singing/half shouting in his London tongue, and not trying to sound like someone he isn't. 'Everybody Loves You Babe' also misfires, because of the awkward arrangement which makes it sound like it's taken from a Dennis Potter serial. But these are minor quibbles from a mostly wonderful album. Bragg may have built up the fans with his unique mix of pop and politics, but these days the third 'P', parenthood, is just as important. Welcome to Billy Bragg, the family man.

DOMINIC WAGHORN

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