



Revelators

FROM SCRATCH
Songs For Heroes
GITBOX REBELLION
Pesky Digits
(Rattle)

About the only thing Rattle Records hasn't got right is its choice of title for the genre it seeks to plough. 'New Music' is a ghostly term — it signals very little apart from an absence of roots, it sounds far too much like 'New Age' and it's just, well, woolly.

Fortunately, all else is well — especially considering these two releases constitute a launch for the label. Both these CDs — and especially the Gitbox album — come admirably well dressed and the sound from Progressive Studios (Rattle's production base) is pin-sharp and full of presence.

Philip Dadson's From Scratch ensemble has been overturning preconceptions about music for 16 years now and in that time they've moved from emotive instrumental music to the aimed and structured. Indeed, *Songs For Heroes* takes its title as a brief and homes in on it. The heroes are Dadson's, their names tripped off in a kind of syllabic song cycle — from Coltraine to Buddha, Plato to Gandhi.

If Dadson has laced in melody here and there, most of the music (including the vocals) carries the From Scratch tradition of making percussion do more than you ever thought it could. The unconventional instruments (yes, the PVC pipes are still in there), the richness of texture and the sense of physicality (live performers are as much dance as anything else) persist. Music from wise heads.

Gitbox Rebellion use perhaps the most conventional instrument of all — the steel-string acoustic guitar. Or rather, nine guitars and nothing else. You'll always get more out of recording a bunch of guitar tracks than taking one and doubling it (ask Phil Spector) and when all nine players hit the same chord it fairly leaps out of the speakers.

Pesky Digits covers a variety of styles — African hi-life (arguably the most modern of contemporary guitar styles) in 'Two Iguanas' and a sort of Sousa-for-guitars in 'Connecticut Yankee'. The main title piece takes the old rock lick into a contemporary classical domain, but you can't help feeling they could borrow and subvert a bit more from the rock tradition, which is, after all the guitar's heartland today. A go at the radical turning-down employed by grindcore guitarists (which creates a blunt but immensely dense and powerful sound) springs to mind. Anyhow, *Pesky Digits* plinks, chimes, rings and trills very nicely.

Nice (meaning good) is the word. Both these records are friendly and life-affirming in a very accomplished way. If Rattle can take a leaf from Sun Ra (who's been making "new music" forever) and spin a few heads around while affirming life it will be a very important record label.

RUSSELL BROWN

JULIA FORDHAM
Swept
(Circa)

With her fashion model looks and a voice that sounds classically trained, Julia Fordham launched herself a few years back proclaiming "I'm a woman of the 80s, I'm fit and I'm strong..." So she was and, aside from that poppy single, her first album contained at least one remarkable ballad which has since been covered by other singers.

Now, a couple of albums further on, her up-tempo numbers have moved from the dancefloor to the cocktail lounge. But that's OK, in the hands of rhythm sections including the likes of Pino Palladino, Manu Katche, Vinnie Colaiuta and David Sancious cocktail funk can get pretty appealing at times. Add Fordham's pure, sweetly expressive vocals along with a few good melodic hooks and sections of *Swept* are decidedly listenable.

My doubts arise with some of the slower numbers — and they constitute the majority of the album. Delicately

washed in gentle synth-tones with daubs of soprano sax, piano or vibes, they at times border on the fragile ambience of Enya. 'Rainbow Heart' and the title track have strong tunes but the album's final four tracks strike me as musical therapy for the mushy minded.

PETER THOMSON

FROM BENEATH THE EARTH
CAME ROCK
A History of NZ Music in the 60s
Vol. 1: The Groups
(Den-Che Records)

Now that a whole new generation has gotten hip to how NZ music hasn't always been utterly pathetic via John Baker's *Wild Things* comp, mayhaps you'd care to delve some more. The NZ seengles compiled here'd cost you an arm and a dick if you sought 'em out individually and some of 'em are even worth it, take for inst. the Græmlins' 'Understand Our Age', musically and thematically similar to their better-known 'Coming Generation' or the Minutemen's sub-Kinks "social comment" routine 'Lament of a Clerical Worker', both, I guess, "genre classics" ... elsewhere a bunch of songs you've probably already got one or two versions of get pounded thru one more time and a couple of these are more than OK too ... the stuff's mostly not badass enough to've been on the aforementioned *Wild Things* and not big enough hit-wise to've been on K-Tel's *How Was Was The Air...*, the cover art is lame, and there are no biog/ discog. notes (maybe on the CD, I don't know), but it's certainly not without its redeeming features.

DUANE ZARAKOV

SUGAR BULLET
Refined
(Virgin)

Nowhere on this album's livery do Sugar Bullet let slip that they're Scottish, but they are. Now there's no reason that the bonny Scots can't turn out dance music as well as anyone else in the world — the great Jesse Rae wrote Odyssey's 'Inside Out' and the Shamen have virtually staked themselves out a sub-genre. The opening track here, 'Happy Birthday' sounds like a seriously detoxed version of those same Shamen, but that's as far as the links go.

The rest is a nimble but unexceptional mixed bag of contemporary styles; Scots rap on 'Set Me Free', ragga chat on 'World Peace' and electro scratch-up on 'A Nation Under A Dope Mix'. Lead vocalist I. Coonagh (they don't want you knowing their first names either) crops up all over, but she sounds most comfortable on the obvious standout track, the chunky soul tune 'Dreaming'.

There's nothing really wrong with *Refined*, save that it lacks a little for personality and thus doesn't measure up to its multitude of sources. Sugar Bullet's music is a bit like the modified bar code they use for a logo — nice idea, but it doesn't quite work.

RUSSELL BROWN

PROCOL HARUM
The Prodigal Stranger
(Zoo)

I guess it made sense for them to reform before some bunch of Aussies put together a tribute band. Actually, aside from lyricist Keith Reid, there's just three of the original playing members left, but it was they who formed the essential Procol Harum sound. Robin Trower's guitar still adds an unpretentious bite to the ecclesiastical redolence of Matthew Fisher's organ and Gary Brooker's piano. The musicianship is as fine as ever and Brooker's voice has lost none of its old English-soul-with-adenoids.

For a band whose last major album success was probably '72's *Live With The Edmonton Symphony Orchestra*, this new set makes a welcome, if qualified, return to form. Diehard fans will claim that all the material is good although sceptics and neophytes will regard the majority of songs as not much more than perfunctory vehicles



Gitbox Rebellion (L-R rear) Russell Hughes, Tim Bowman, Wes Prince. Seated are Robert Vanderlaan, Kim Halliday and Robert Hall.

for the Procol Harum sound. Rhythmically, things generally plod along much as they always used to, but after a couple of listens an attractive tune or three becomes distinguishable, repeatable, even memorable. 'Holding On', for example, has a yearning appeal along with moments of Caribbean flavouring, while 'One More Time' confidently rides the sort of laid-back semi-metal that Joe Walsh

once patented. While there may not be much on *Prodigal Stranger* to rival such glories of yesteryear as 'Hamburg' or 'Conquistador' let alone the monumental 'Whiter Shade of Pale', at least Keith Reid is unintimidated enough by the past to recycle his famous line, "I wandered through my playing cards". And if what he and the band have dealt us is basically a

slightly shuffled hand from the same old deck, at least they're back in the game.
PETER THOMSON

CRASH TEST DUMMIES
The Ghosts That Never Haunt Me
(BMG)

With a moniker that evokes a Gary Larson cartoon (Revenge of the ...) and an album cover full of morose gothic symbolism, you'd have to admit the marketing strategy for this album is far from the norm. Especially from a Canadian band that sound like the Hothouse Flowers. But to pigeonhole them within the first paragraph would be terrible, so maybe I'll expound on that a little.

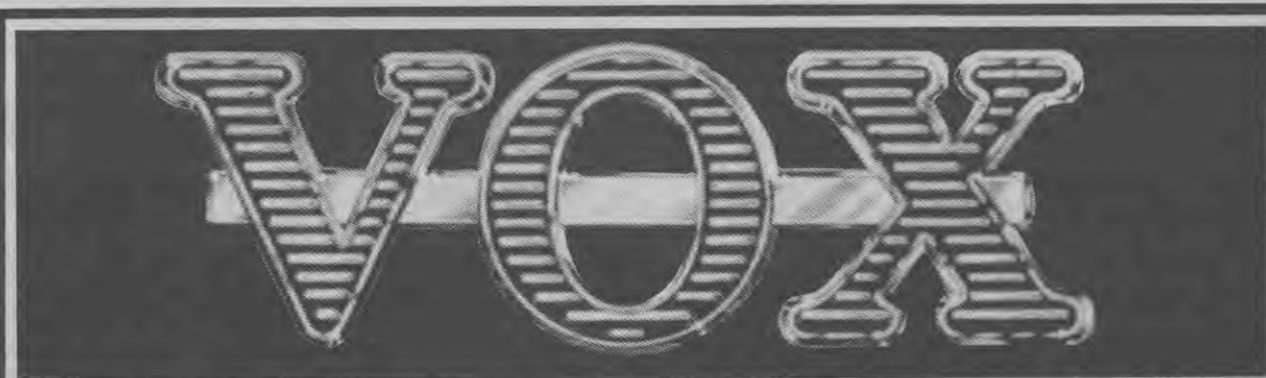
The Crash Test Dummies are an 'interesting' band with members who have broad influences or, alternately, are very strange indeed. The lead singer sounds similar to Nick Cave (only a lot happier) or Tom Waites (with less concrete in his cups of coffee). Yet this isn't a darkened gothic type of band at all. Their sound is more modern folkish, country influenced, Irish gig on crack.

Lyricaly the music is very strong, the highlight being 'At My Funeral' which tells an enlightening (or depressing)

story of coming to terms with the afterlife. Throughout the album there are sprinklings of philosophy, social comment and Shakespeare — which strangely enough is good and bad at the same time.

The atmosphere created is very specific, a very late night, background music in a pleasant cafe type of sound. *The Ghosts That Never Haunt Me* is the type of album that will appeal, yet never surprise. And the *Crash Test Dummies* are a band who I can see progressing no further.
JOHN TAITE

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