

The Pooh Sticks are three girls and two boys. Sometimes they sound happy and sometimes they sound sad. They're not nostalgia freaks, they just have a sense of history, a feel for insidious guitar riffs and honest vocals. What more do you want?
DONNA YUZWALK

**SISTERS OF MERCY
Some Girls Wander By Mistake
(Warner Music)**

The Sisters are now famous as a cartoon about David Bowie with a script by Kafka, so this compilation, which goes back to the days when they were, as Paul McKessar wrote, the missing link between Joy Division and Led Zeppelin, should confuse a few latecomers. The sound couldn't be further from their recent Steinman-produced epics: these are eight-track recordings built around three note basslines and primitive drum programmes, burnt-out structures inhabited by Eldritch's mock heroic voice. More than once the mention of Suicide in the liner notes seems justified. Anyone who doesn't already know should buy it just to find out how good a one string riff can sound on 'The Temple Of Love'.

And yet for all the apparent difference between the old and new Sisters the idea is the same: a simultaneous celebration and mockery of the magnificent rock gesture, a strange drama of simultaneous desire to laugh at and lament the necessary failure of everything Eldritch's heroes (Iggy Pop, TS Eliot and Klaus Kinski,

ultimately the whole damn Romantic / Modernist movement) stood for. It's all but spelled out on a cover of the Stooges' '1969' in which the muscular energy that belied the lyric's pessimism is replaced by a shuddering, faltering dirge. A beautiful, ridiculous noise for people who love rock music and hate it.
MATTHEW HYLAND

**THE CLASH
The Singles
(Columbia)**

From punk to a jeans commercial, it's debatable whether the mighty have fallen or risen to new heights since Joe Strummer's pursuit of the popular mainstream energies of rockers like Elvis (Presley) and Bruce Springsteen makes one wonder if he'd enjoy his new double-stitched audience. While 1977 contemporaries like Elvis (Costello) crossed the Atlantic as part of the New Wave assignment (ie anything wearing a thin leather tie), the Clash hit America as Rock and wrote themselves a one-way ticket to *Rolling Stone* magazine / FM limbo.

The point of the Rock world is you're safer dead and a singles collection will make a conservative burial for less classic memories of the band's driving force and skinny white aggression; Strummer stoned in his Travis Bickle mohan and Mick Jones as the rhyming coat-hanger. The band that shook your fanny with 'White Riot' is now being measured up for a place next to porcelain busts of the King and the Jan Wenner songbook, company icons for old folks who miss yesterday

and the people who sang it.

That's unfortunate because as a band the Clash were never that classic and nowhere near sombre enough to sit quietly in a Rock'n'Roll hall of fame. 'Train in Vain' is pure Beat-style pop and tracks like 'Bankrobber' and 'Rock the Casbah' are hooky and smart. 'Hitsville UK', 'Remote Control', 'London Calling' — the titles alone beg mythologising and you just know they'll get it in spades from every fat music magazine everywhere in the world. Live the Clash sang flat and their albums were patchy; it's unlikely the kiddies who lap up this collection will get as much joy from a 3-CD *Sandinista* album. The Clash were angry and stupid and a bit of a laugh and they should be enjoyed that way instead of being relegated to the lineage of classic rock — a limp, indifferent genre invented by people who stopped listening a long time ago.
CHAD TAYLOR

**CHARLIE RICH
Pictures and Paintings
(Sire / Warners)**

'You Don't Know Me', the second track on this album, would have been a more appropriate title for this wonderful record. For nearly 20 years the gigantic talents of Charlie Rich have been languishing in country-politan schlock. But this is the man who Sam Phillips regarded as his greatest discovery after Elvis. The man who can sing like Elvis, or Bobby Bland, or Frank Sinatra and play the piano as well as Roy Charles, or Erroll Garner. The man whose great works in many

genres — rockabilly, country, jazz, r&b — reached few ears. The man who had a No. 1 hit back in 1973 with 'The Most Beautiful Girl' and said hello to TV talkshow-land Las Vegas and goodbye to his creativity. In the words of Little Richard, he'd got what he wanted, but lost what he had. So he sat, sittin' and thinkin' with his bottle of gin, swearing that one day he'd record again the way he wanted to.

Well Charlie Rich has finally done it. *Pictures and Paintings* is the album of his career. All the potential shown by so many songs over dozens of albums (some so bad no budget bin will have 'em) is fulfilled here. After years of emasculation by schlockmeister Billy Sherrill — who, it must be said, helped Charlie achieve some great work early in his tenure at Epic — he is finally playing his own piano. Singing great songs, some of them standards, some of them new originals by Rich and his long-suffering wife Margaret Anne, some of them new interpretations of tunes he's already recorded.

All sides of Charlie Rich are shown: his soulfulness, his creativity, his feel for jazz and gospel. The magnificent voice, propelled by his own piano and a discreet small combo. It's produced by three men with the greatest sensitivity for older musicians: writers Peter Guralnick (whose essays on Rich are masterly) and Joe McEwan, plus Rounder records man Scott Billington. No longer does Charlie have to sing 'I tried, I failed/ and I feel like going home', though a new, choral version of that classic song finishes the album. He's back, and at his best, and we can

wallow in the wonder that is Charlie Rich. (Back catalogue hint: everything he did before 1974 contains some hidden marvel.)
CHRIS BOURKE

**XTC
Nonsuch (Virgin)**

It's been at least ten years since XTC were a part of the vital strains of rock n'roll. Since that time Partridge and Moulding, impervious to the fluctuations of fashion from the seclusion of Swindon, have continued to observe the peculiarities of human behaviour and process them through their craft and English analogies.

Nonsuch, like their last release, 1989's underrated *Oranges and Lemons* is a double album but this time there's a medieval minstrel perspective unifying things. The cracking modern tale of martyrdom 'The Ballad of Peter Pompinkhead' opens Partridge's account and from there he movingly traces the death of a clown in 'Dear Madam Barnum' and the anger of a terminated relationship in 'Crocodile'.

Moulding, whether as the foil or complement, is at his best on 'My Bird Performs', the clever dig at human progress 'The Smartest Monkeys' and the triviality of small dreams in 'Bungalow'.

But although *Nonsuch* has more wit and imagination than most "contemporary" bands could muster, Partridge with songs like 'That Wave' and 'Wrapped in Grey' and 'The Ugly Underneath' allows the album to become too overwrought, a weakness avoided by *Skylarking* and *Oranges*

and *Lemons*. *Nonsuch* has to settle for qualified success.
GEORGE KAY

**MELISSA ETHERIDGE
Never Enough
(Island)**

This woman — like Joan Jett and a couple of others before her — has rendered the hitherto serviceable term 'journeyman rocker' gender-bound. Otherwise the category seems appropriate: a gutsy voice, strong guitar-based rhythms and only about three decent songs per album.

For example Etheridge's 1988 debut album is most memorable for a couple of numbers seething with sexual jealousy. The hit single 'Bring Me Some Water' had the intensity of prime cut Rolling Stones.

Never Enough doesn't include anything quite so hot although the opening track, 'Ain't It Heavy', comes close enough for satisfaction. What's more, its lyrical content is considerably cheerier. The album's two other highpoints are both ballads: 'Dance Without Sleeping' and 'The boy Feels Strange'.

Elsewhere she tries a few new moves including a synthesized dance beat here and some industrial funk there. Nonetheless, it's the three tracks mentioned which prove that Melissa Etheridge has a better voice and can occasionally write smarter than the majority of her fellow — better make that 'compatriot' — journeyman rockers.
PETER THOMSON

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