

No '60s retread, their folk rock has power

Nikki Meets the Hibachi

the bluest sky
Bated Breath Records
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Nikki Meets the Hibachi's first full-length release should turn heads for both members of the dynamic duo of John Gillespie and Elaine Tola as well as give a fresh breath to the small but growing local music industry. The 11-song acoustic picnic treasures life's simplest pleasures in a quaint but inspiring fashion. Neo-folk rock couldn't be much more entertaining — especially with an added array of instrumentation and fully packaged production work that spins it out of a narrower local context.

Traditional folk that hibernates in the '60s can become oh-so boring, and the duo seems to have come to grips with the fleeting appeal of the retro-folk that continues to bring back the heyday of the late '60s. Though any sort of folk runaround simply can't break new ground, this record broods a little heavier within the

CHARLES MARSHALL Albums

bright and feathery lyrical overtones. While the band's first record, *Hanna's Amorphous Hat*, clinched their acoustical origins and earned them wide local praise, *the bluest sky* takes a more professional outlook featuring more diligent writing and stronger song structures. The heavier licks that accompany songs like "Outside Looking In" have a more noticeable staying power, while the supple, caressing-style of songs like "Running in my Sleep" lend plausibility to Tola's dreamy vocals.

The attitude of the two musicians is one of self-assured, simple happiness — easy to tell stories about childhood, adulthood and friendship without a lot of abstract nonsense and go-figure nonsequiturs.

"Song" opens the album with a brief vocal synopsis that awakens the listener and sets the stage for what lies ahead: "When everyone has compromised you/ what you need is someone who will fight for you," Tola and Gillespie take turns singing. "the bluest sky" entertains this idea further, projecting a clean, wispy, inspir-

ing melody, though snatches of redundancy creep into its final stages.

"Shake off the Cold" crackles and purrs with fireside energy as the duo sings: "Can I pick off the dust on my shoes/ and warm my feet by the fire/ and shake off the cold?" "Peacemaker" brews with the potential to break into an electric rage, but there are no drums or Marshall stacks, so the fire is nonetheless quelled by circumstance.

The addition of piano, especially on the first side, adds the delightful touch of tranquil poise and broadens the record's musical perspective. The banjo in "days like these" sets up a country flavor, but the band never quite turns the trick, opting instead to straddle the fence.

The hooks of "Words and Paper" from *Hanna*, and the band's Indigo Girls' influences, however, don't always fall so easily by the wayside. "Love" breaks in with familiar riffs and twangy energy. It represents the tension between the faithful sounds of the last record and the crispy elegance of this one.

The final rendition of the record's revealing content is found in "bigger." Simple melodic staples absorb the lyrical element of growth: "little boys play war/ little girls play house ... do you want to play war/ do you want to play house?"



"We've got our whole lives in front of us," John Gillespie said about the theme of *the bluest sky* before their album release party at the Cat's Cradle in January. The notion of an idealistic

romanticism creeps all through the *bluest sky*.

Light on the outlook, but heavy on content. A healthy, albeit hearty combination.

Sting's still dreary, but there's a glimmer of hope

Sting
The Soul Cages
Island Records
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On first listening, *The Soul Cages*, Sting's third solo album and first in three years, seemed as if it was finally the bad album that every artist makes because the songs didn't jump out and enlighten instantaneously. It obviously meant that the success he had in the past was catching up with him and now was the time for failure.

Wrong. After listening to his precise arrangements and creative melodies a few more times, the concession is now that once again Sting has proven himself to be one of the most versatile and moving musical artists in the modern era. Don't get a different image now — the album does drip with dreariness, but at the same time, it gives a sense of illumination.

The theme running throughout the nine-song album is about the relationship between Sting and his late father. The lead-off track, "Island Of Souls," symbolizes the theme as it details the situations between a shipbuilder's son and his father. Mixed with both a haunting keyboard melody and a distinct beat, it perfectly sets the mood for the rest of the album.

Falling away from his jazz ven-

TIM LITTLE Albums

tures, Sting puts new band members and several different styles in *Cages*. Keyboard extraordinaire Kenny Kirkland and saxophonist Branford Marsalis remain, but in come Manu Katche on drums and Dominic Miller on guitars.

Sting also goes a little into the realm of the peculiar as he includes oboes, synclaviers and even northumbrian pipes in the instrumental work.

The pipes wonderfully flow in and out of the album, which proceeds to give an image of the shipyard, the father, and his son. The oboes also

work out well on the album as they back up the pipes perfectly.

One song that differs from many on the album is "Mad About You," which sounds as if it was a track off Sting's second album, ...*Nothing Like The Sun*. It calls to mind aspects of "Sister Moon" and "Be Still My Beating Heart," and it also shows that Sting is still a flexible artist — one that can relentlessly craft original melodies for new material.

Another song that is similar to an old Sting song is "The Wild Wild Sea," which is quite like "Tea In The Sahara." The song is like a journal of a dream that comes to a great climax when Sting sings that upon a black vessel of death underneath the sailor's hat he saw his father's face.

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