

Svara's EP a literary, thoughtful adventure

John Svara and the Reptiles

Bathyscaphe

Independent

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If anything less than Mudhoney or Nirvana seems wimpy to you, then John Svara and the Reptiles' new EP *Bathyscaphe* won't provide headbanging pleasure.

Its catchy melodies, honed harmonies, intelligent lyrics and vocal pyrotechnics will appeal, however, to what's inside your skull.

Even the title may seem cerebral. Svara explained the metaphor: "Going down into the ocean in a bathyscaphe, a diving boat, is going into another environment, but it's sort of like being in a womb and I think college is sort of like that."

"No one could ever understand what I was saying. I thought if I wrote it on the cover of the tape, they would know what the word is."

The band consists of Svara on lead vocals and lead guitar, John Gillespie (of Nikki Meets the Hibachi) on bass and background vocals and Mark Simmons on drums. They produced this six-song piece (available at Schoolkids and Skylight Exchange) during exam week, something Svara, a senior English major, said, "I would not do again."

But the stress of studying for exams didn't mar the musicianship of this album.

Although Svara's energy level and

MARA LEE

Album

showboating high notes seem slightly lower on the album than in live performance, the band has added some instrumental frills and harmonies that more than make up for it.

The album could benefit from stronger background vocals though Gillespie sometimes fades a little too far into the background, and in fact, at times is hardly audible.

The first piece, "Marissa," a post-apocalyptic song about a mechanical woman, has an instrumental section with a vibraphone (it sounds like a very clear bell) and percussion that sounds like the wooden instrument you used to play in nursery school, or the special effects on old-time radio of horses running.

The song is decidedly upbeat in rhythm as Svara sings "She is such a graceful dancer/She makes my coolant boil." The chorus almost forces the listener to sing along, "Marissa, will you accompany me to the post-industrial ball?" But Svara slips some social commentary in along with the pop hook as he sings, "She might be a metallic messiah/To lead us from our scrapyard past."

"The Letter," a song about a runaway, has a three-note rocking bass line that underpins it. Svara wrote lyrics that echo the balcony scene in *Cyrano de Bergerac*, when he says her words are like buckshot, or stones falling from a balcony like artillery. Gillespie's harmony on the chorus adds a touch of melancholy. But the ending, a triumphant, punchy, "Rocked herself to sleep," underscores

the heroine's self-reliance and newfound freedom.

"Third Floor," which is a rather misleading name — most fans think of it as "Spanish Castle" — debunks the conventional wisdom that live performance always beats the studio. It begins with a twangy lone guitar, but when the other instruments come in, they immediately set the ominous tone. Svara's vocals, the only ones on this song, eerily resonate to give the listener a sense of foreboding.

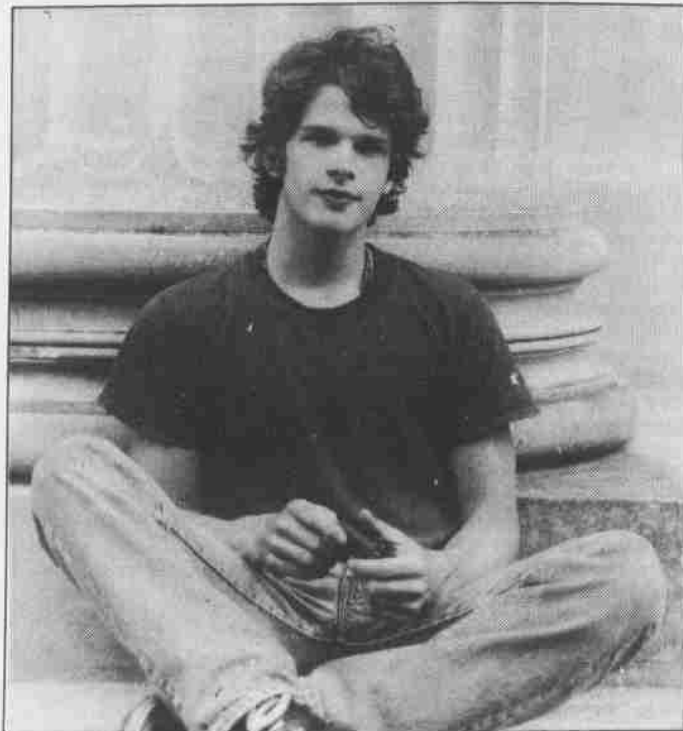
He does not end the chorus with a crescendoing high note, as he does live, but instead begins the crescendo, then turns it down until the last chorus. He then hits a note of such pitch and length to impress even the most jaded music fan.

The lyrics suggest a fascinating ambiguity about a night spent in the abandoned castle. Did he sleepwalk? His friends say, "You look like you've seen some kind of ghost/I said, 'I know ghosts/They are the least of our fears.'"

"Lifeline" is marked by a strong bass line. The song takes place in a bathyscaphe. The hero seems a little twisted, as he says, "I like to think about all this water crashing in on me" — yeah, OK — but you don't stop to analyze, because the harmony on the chorus, "You are my lifeline," is the most impressive on the album.

"Bones and Ashes" is a touch oblique, but Svara said he could not illuminate it any more than to say it described the end of relationships. The man sings, "You say that I am like reading a book with eyes closed/Well, I don't know, I'm sorry." No regrets need be expressed for the harmony on the chorus, another tune that sticks in your head.

"Solomon," a song based on Toni



John Svara, whose new EP is titled 'Bathyscaphe'

Morrison's novel, *Song of Solomon*, has the most distinct story line. Svara gives Solomon's wife Sing the chance to express a feminist view.

In the novel, Solomon literally flies off, leaving Sing and her 20 or so children. "You were given wings/Well I have only shoulders/And your lightness has made me heavy," she says.

Solomon becomes a local legend in Morrison's book. Sing points out, "But heroes don't just fly away and leave their families/When glory comes."

Svara said he was moving away from the more acoustic tone of his first album, *Reptiles*.

"I don't want to be limited to that genre," he said, "though these six songs are acoustic dominated."

Six songs doesn't provide for enough of Svara's almost magical diaphragm work or space for ballads he performs live. But at \$5, who could complain?

This album will give John Svara junkies a fix, as he tours more statewide and plays here less frequently.

Music to move the mind and the butt

The Family Stand

Moon in Scorpio

East/West Records America

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Not in the mood to listen to anything with a beat stronger than the backbone of a jellyfish this weekend, this writer was given an album to review which provided anything but passive listening. From the first blast of guitar and screaming vocals to the last R&B strains, The Family Stand's *Moon In Scorpio* defies the listener to sit back for an easy ride. Be prepared for forceful music and lyrics that challenge a complacent state of mind, daring the listener to grapple with serious social and cultural issues.

This utterly unclassifiable album vacillates from the orchestral and melodic to the sultry and provocative, integrated with some seriously fiery, funky, hip-hop rock. One critic says the band "makes music that moves

LINDSAY LOWRY

Album

the mind and the butt."

The New York-based trio consists of keyboardist Peter Lord, lead and backing vocalist Sandra St. Victor and one-man orchestra V. Jeffrey Smith, who does everything from the usual guitar-keyboard-vocals-bass-and-drum-programming to saxophones and flutes.

Blending music and message can be a dangerous thing, often resulting in a deficiency in one or both areas. The band seems to have found a blend of the two which works well, keeping the experience positive in the midst of its confrontational qualities.

A vital aspect of the band's music is its ability to transcend popular cultural categories and stereotypes to reach a diverse audience on its own terms. Although the political music deals with racial/cultural issues, the underlying theme is one that everyone can and should relate to.

They do all this with a torrid mixture of rock, funk, soul and style that evokes comparisons to Prince and Living Color, yet remains unique.

Living Color guitarist Vernon Reid is responsible for some comparisons — he provides the raucous guitar riffs on a few songs, most noticeably on the blasting opener, "New World Order." The song combines Reid's riffs with Smith's free-jazz sax and an overall funky hip-hop flavor, and aims its satirical fire at the current rhetoric-ridden political power structure.

This theme is picked up in the title track "Moon In Scorpio," which starts off with a Prince-like sound reminiscent of "Purple Rain" and quickly takes on the fervent quality of Living Color. As it swings between slow undulating harmonies and the driven, guitar-controlled frenetics, the song drives home such pungent postulations as: "New World Orders get seen for what they are/The same old folks trying to hold onto power."

The provocative "Plantation Radio" combines soulful lyricism with a punched-out rap to give a biting commentary on media politics and "cul-

tural apartheid." Says Lord: "We're not so much dissing the musicians named on the song as we are the system that deems it necessary to have a Paul Simon or a Sting discover music by non-white artists before it can become legitimate. I call it 'The Christopher Columbus Syndrome.'"

Throughout these forceful social commentaries are various tunes which range from a saxophone-led jazz instrumental, "Free Spirit," to the ballad "Quiet Desperation."

So if you're in the mood for something that'll make you groove in spite of yourself, something that would make even a sloth tap its two toes, something that defies you to sit passively by and clean your nails while you listen ... this is the album.

THE RATINGS

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