

Audiophile

by David Stout . Q-Notes staff
Under the influences

Read any press release promoting a new album and you'll find a paragraph crowing that the collection was influenced by *this* legendary artist or by *that* classic album. It's a simple, effective way to hook the media and create buzz among taste-making record buy-



Mandy Moore sheds the last coquettish vestiges of her former teen stardom on 'Amanda Leigh.'

ers. After getting burned a few times, though, you understand that it's hype and hyperbole



that's rarely evident in the work. When I read the promo packets that arrived with Mandy Moore's new album, "Amanda Leigh," and Diane Birch's debut, "Bible Belt," I couldn't stifle an eye-roll for the youthful artists' temerity. The former name-checked all-time greats like CSNY, Joni Mitchell and Todd Rundgren, while the latter listed giants Laura Nyro and Carole King as guiding spirits. *Mm-hm, riight.*

Well, imagine the stunned look on my face when I played the discs through in one enthralling listening session and found the fingerprints of those respective masters all over the two releases.

Rundgren is a particular touchstone for **Mandy Moore's** set. The shimmering pop melodies that buoy "Amanda Leigh" (Storefront Recordings) — the 25-year-old's actual first and middle names — recall the beauty of "Something/Anything?," Rundgren's double-album masterpiece from '72.

Opening "Amanda" stunner "Merrimack River" declares right up front that Moore is soaring through the rare air of "I Saw The Light," "Hello It's Me" and "The Night The Carousel Burned Down," heavenly highlights from "S/A."

The secret of Moore's success is Mike Viola, her producer and co-writer and the album's chief instrumentalist. He confidently guides the singer to full artistic adulthood,

helping her shed the last coquettish vestiges of her former teen stardom.

Whether she's singing an aching ballad ("Everblue") or a playful pop romp ("I Could Break Your Heart Any Day Of The Week"), Moore responds with one assured vocal performance after the next, ably supported by Viola's sterling harmonies and backgrounds.

Thankfully, the project is never constrained by the pair's overt, potentially staid preoccupation with artistic growth. Running just below the surface is a quiriness ("hahaha, lalala" refrains, farting Farfisa organs, clavinet punctuations) that imbues the set with life and invention. "Amanda Leigh" is a winner from top to bottom.

Singer/songwriter **Diane Birch** hits a grand slam homer her first time at bat with "Bible Belt" (S-Curve). It's not a stretch to suggest that, had the album had been released in the era of "Tapestry" (King) and "New York Tendaberry" (Nyro), it would be regarded as a classic just like those timeless collections.

The youngest child of an itinerant evangelist, Birch spent her youth traveling the globe (Zimbabwe, South Africa, Australia) soaking up far-flung experiences most people won't encounter in a lifetime.

When the family eventually returned to America and settled in Portland, Ore., Birch, by this time a teen, taught herself to play classical piano completely by ear. As she grew, her tastes expanded to encompass everything from Delta Blues and Motown to surf rock and AM classics.

"Bible Belt" was written entirely by Birch and produced by Grammy winners Steve Greenberg, soul legend Betty Wright and Michael Mangini, working as a team for the first time since producing Joss Stone's acclaimed debut and follow-up.

The 13 beautifully-crafted tracks that reside on "Bible Belt" are a potent blend of soul, gospel, pop and blues, deepened and propelled by Birch's emotive voice and her prodigious work on a variety of keys — piano, Rhodes, Wurlitzer and Farfisa. Add in the project's outstanding melodies and incisive lyrics and "Bible Belt" is a stunning beginning for an artist gifted with a multitude of talents. **D**

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