

3 Different Artists Find Common Ground With Mediocrity

Jaheim
Ghetto Love
★ ★ ★ 1/2

It's time for the hip-hop stylings of Jaheim on his debut album, *Ghetto Love*. (That's "Jaheim" spelled in silver, emblazoned across a little emblem that resembles an expensive hood ornament).

You may have heard the single "Could It Be," which is already getting airtime on 102 Jamz.

For a 21-year-old first-timer, Jaheim is not bad. Listening to his simple seduction grooves, it's hard not to bob your head a little.

You start to identify with the brother ... like, yeah, girl, I hate it when I wanna hit it in the worst way, but I don't know if you really feelin' me or if it's just the ice you see, or my drop-top Benz.

Jaheim's music is of the cheerful, harmlessly swaggering variety. He's not shy about his wealth or his sexual intentions, he's just straightforward in his presentation of a highly stylized version of ghetto life.

But his lyrics are really secondary to the smooth bassline and the vocals — he knows the right ingredients for radio-friendly R&B.

And how can you not admire lyrics like "I think you better let it go, heard that you been creepin' round my baby's back do' ... I think you wanna let it be, but if you want beef I got the recipe?"

Lines like that, along with the fact that Jaheim rhymes "illin'" with "Terry McMillan" made me an instant fan — of the first few songs at least.

Unfortunately for Jaheim, the album goes on a little too long. Perhaps in honor of his 21 years, Jaheim created an album with 21 songs. After awhile, he wears out all the typical "ghetto love" topics — quit messin' with my shortie, do

you just love me or my money, your kid's not mine, lookin' for love in the wrong places — and moves on to the more grandiose, eternal-love type ballads.

Such topics are best left to the likes of Whitney Houston and Celine Dion because they take all the fun away from artists like Jaheim. The song "Remarkable" is a good example of this. It "will surely be a wedding song for many," according to the promotional material, but it is by far the worst on the album.

If you're going to work with cliches, you should at least keep them light and clever. This is especially true for Jaheim — as much as I enjoyed the first tracks, he is a completely unoriginal artist and as such, his album soon started to drag.

Jaheim successfully creates a persona for himself, but it's the exact same one that we've been getting on urban radio stations for much of this past decade.

So, while the first several minutes of his album are vaguely enjoyable, Jaheim has brought nothing new or dynamic to the R&B table.

Joanna Pearson

Jessica Andrews
Who I Am
★ ★

One glance at the cover of Jessica Andrews' newest album and the word

"Britney" shamelessly pops into my head. I hustle for my CD player, making sure none of my suitmates are around.

But hopes for an assembly-line pop hit like "Oops ... I Did It Again" are squelched by the twangin' steel guitars that fade in on the first track of *Who I Am*.

Andrews is actually a 17-year-old country singer. More accurately, a pop-country "crossover," as entertainment media have identified artists of this genre.

The production and songs bring comparisons to other crossover artists like Shania Twain. But Andrews, still young in comparison to the 36-year-old Twain, lacks the swagger of her contemporary.

Since the only thing Andrews actually contributes to the disc is her voice and a face (having absolutely no hand in the songwriting), I'll begin there.

Andrews' voice is stronger than average, and her range is exceptional. Her Texas-sounding accent is minimal, but present nonetheless. As far as originality — well, she sounds about like her pop-country female counterparts.

The album definitely doesn't have explosive hits like Twain's "Any Man of Mine," but the songs are good enough to attract even more attention than Andrews' 1999 debut.

The first three songs are all especially catchy, in a borderline annoying way. Then things get funny.

Track four, "Karma," features Andrews stuttering the word "Kkk-kkk-kkk-karma ... What goes up goes down, hits the ground." (Enter a "Karma Police" or "Karma Chameleon" joke here, your choice).

The rest of "Who I Am" contains both slower country ballads and upbeat pop-sounding songs, all fully equipped with steel guitars, multiple-backing vocals and fiddle solos courtesy of her small swarm of hired hands.

The bottom line is this: Andrews does exactly what she is commissioned to do — sing her heart out and provide a marketable face.

The irony is in the CD's title, *Who I Am* — perhaps more accurately *Who They Tell Me to Be*.

Jason Arthurs

Chris Titchner
and Sunday Rain Dog
Some Things Never Change
★ 1/2

I was lying in bed during my first listen to Chris Titchner and Sunday Rain Dog's *Some Things Never Change* until "My Town," the album's second song, in which he complains about his neighbors' loud reggae and rap.

"I don't want to rain in on their parade/But I don't want to live my life to their repetitive bass lines," he whines.

Hearing it forced me to get up and pull out my guitar to see exactly how

much more complex Titchner's dime-a-dozen, church youth group, slide-the-capo-up-to-change-key three and four chord folk progressions are than those nefarious bass lines. The answer is: not much.

"I don't like to be unpredictable," Titchner admits during the album's first tune, "Breakdown," and that pretty much sums up this album. Singer-songwriter Titchner plays coffeehouse acoustic guitar with Sunday Rain Dog, a.k.a. cellist Ana Jesse, and offers few surprises despite Jesse's unique and helpful presence.

While Jesse's cello augments the humdrum arrangements, it can't really save the mostly pathetic lyrics. Titchner's honest lyrics could be compared to those of local fav Andy Kuncel, except that they are often cliché-ridden and awkward where Kuncel's are humorous and refreshing.

Examples are abundant in "Bad Dog," the album's first single, which is written from the perspective of a dog who "Get(s) hot under the collar when they throw all those leftovers away/When dogs are starving in China."

In "Enfield, N.H." a tune about a waning relationship, Titchner moves from saying "I keep shooting airballs and he's still in the zone" to "I need to reserve you but you're out on loan," one of the worst metaphor shifts that I could imagine.

When not flat, his words often

become, dare I say, repetitive, as he utters phrases like "I don't wanna be the one" more times than I'd like to count, as well as rephrasing "Apathy is harder to break out of than gravity" in a couple of different songs. This stuff can be so grating at times that you can almost sympathize with the woman ending the relationship he eulogizes in several of the songs.

Of course, the album has its moments, such as "Smile," a piece about domestic violence highlighted by parallel tempo and thematic shifts. This tune actually makes one want to hold back tears rather than roll your eyes.

Titchner's formula also works in "What About You?" an upbeat tune that comes as close as Titchner gets to Kuncel's energetic music, and his voice sounds pretty good throughout *Some Things Never Change*, especially in "Suicide King."

Unfortunately, too much else sounds pretty much the same throughout. Even its alternation of fast and slow songs is another tired cliché that does little to keep things interesting.

The album basically smacks of the hackneyed coffeehouse fodder, written and performed by countless musicians, that innovative singer-songwriters like Kuncel and Ani DiFranco have managed to avoid.

Unlike these artists, Chris Titchner just puts me to sleep.

Warren Wilson

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