

# Arie, Cave Offer Smoldering Releases; DiFranco Dabbles in Jazz

## India Arie Acoustic Soul

★★★★ 1/2  
"This is in remembrance of our ancestors," whispers India Arie to begin her album.

She goes on to thank R&B greats Cooke, Gaye, Hathaway and others who "opened up a door."  
"Because of you," she intones, "change gon' come."

Many young artists give similar lip service, but then produce music lacking any sense of reverence for their idols.

With *Acoustic Soul*, Arie openly pays homage to her artistic legacy. In fact, the album's last track "Wonderful" is a dedication to Motown labelmate Stevie Wonder.

But the most powerful tribute comes between the praises that open and close the recording. *Acoustic Soul* is a heartfelt effort that exhibits all the characteristics of its fifth track's title - "Strength, Courage, & Wisdom."

The vital strength of this melodic album is Arie's voice. It is smoldering and textured, equally capable of gentle coos or visceral moans. The sensuality of Arie's sound is slightly reminiscent of Nina Simone, while the styling of her vocals leans on Tracy Chapman and Bill Withers. Like Chapman, her range is not great but the variance Arie achieves within it is magnificent.

On the snappy "Video," Arie sings of conformity with a thoughtful warmth that fellow Atlans TLC couldn't reach on their hit "Unpretty." And her voice adds an affecting honesty to life story tracks like "Promises" and "Beautiful."

Arie's singing is well complimented by the album's production and songwriting. *Acoustic Soul* presents a spare yet enveloping sound that is intuitive, balanced and highly personal.

The soundscape that her writing is set against is equal parts folk and blues. Most tracks have an old school earthiness, but new and old elements are blended well throughout the album.

"Nature," for example, has a drum-heavy hip-hop beat that is layered with intriguing string loops.

Instead of submitting to a team of producers, Arie co-wrote all but one of her songs and penned two of the

strongest tracks by herself.

When you experience the album's consistency and charisma you'll wish every R&B singer had her courage.

That consistency shows Arie's artistic wisdom.

She rejects the shotgun approach that plagues today's R&B. No rock acts or rappers make appearances. From beginning to end, the only duet is that of Arie's voice and her acoustic guitar.

Recently, the flow of R&B has shown signs of exciting change. Artists like Erykah Badu and D'Angelo have received popular acclaim and inspired what is being called a "soul renaissance."

Naturally, India Arie fits into that movement, but dismissing her as Badu-like is missing the point.

*Acoustic Soul* presents a wonderfully warm and refreshing collection of soul music from a young artist with deep roots in R&B both past and present.

So, instead of seeing her as the next Tracy Chapman, open yourself up to the authenticity of India Arie. I think you'll agree that change has come.

Michael Woods

## Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds No More Shall We Part

★★★★ 1/2

Over 20 years, Nick Cave has acquired a cult following and constant critical acclaim for his unique blend of potent, insightful lyrics and traditional song forms.

The Australian native has spent his career dissecting the extremities of the human experience in song, often tackling subjects as disparate as romance and murder within the same song.

*No More Shall We Part*, his 11th studio album, finds Cave returning to an exploration of darker territory, while retaining much of musical restraint found on 1997's *The Boatman's Call*, his previous effort with the Bad Seeds.

The album opens with the groaning organ/piano ballad "As I Sat Sadly by Her Side," in which Cave expresses a disbelief that God could have a hand in such a violent, twisted world.

Consequently, the track introduces the metaphysical question which haunts the entire album - Where does the divine love of God enter into the inferior and

conditional love of man?

The presence of God is palpable throughout the majority of *No More Shall We Part*. The album is filled with delicate piano-and-string-driven love songs, such as the title track, that find Cave calling out to God for inspiration. "Oh My Lord" mounts to a steady gospel march as Cave drops to his knees in supplication - "How have I offended thee?/ Wrap your tender arms around me/ Oh, my Lord!"

What gives the album its disturbingly dark tone, though, is that Cave's prayers are never answered. For all his pleading, his troubles are never resolved at all - much less resolved peacefully - which leaves the listener in a state of bewilderment.

For such a thematically dense, striking album, *No More Shall We Part* is remarkably subtle. This is largely due to the Bad Seeds' rich, yet carefully measured performance.

The seven musicians never overpower Cave's fiery presence or intricate lyrics, but always balance support and accentuation of his conceits while driving the compositions forward with their interplay of guitars, violin and organ.

Adding a new ingredient to the mix on several tracks are Kate and Anna McGarrigle, known for their bright, folksy harmonies. This album marks the first time that Cave and the Bad Seeds have hired backup singers, and their presence lends an otherworldliness to the songs.

*No More Shall We Part* demands repeat listenings to fully comprehend and appreciate, but it is the kind of album that will reveal new meanings and interpretations each time.

Another landmark in the trail of stellar albums Nick Cave and his Bad Seeds have left in their wake, *No More Shall We Part* is often lushly beautiful, sometimes frighteningly tense and, in moments, even darkly humorous, but it is always the sound of a riveting artistic statement.

Michael Abernethy

## Ani DiFranco Revelling/Reckoning

★★★ 1/2

If everyone looked as good with

dreadlocks as Ani DiFranco, we'd probably all forgo the shampoo and get them.

Similarly, if every musician had the ability to fuse genres like DiFranco, there would be no genres left because everyone would be doing it.

But most people can't.

DiFranco has the enviable ability of being able to pull things off and pull them off well, whether it's her music or her musical persona - she was the girl in your high school who first experimented with Manic Panic (and it actually looked good), and still could have been elected Prom Queen (had she not been too busy becoming a folk-rocker).

Thus her newest album *Revelling/Reckoning* is just one more example of DiFranco pulling something off well. This double disc release is her 13th full-length project, and it is surprisingly heavy on horns and jazz.

DiFranco has clearly made a move from a solitary singer-songwriter to a musician who is more fully integrated with her band. This album's quiet funk and jazz strain prove how effective she's been in this shift.

There is still enough of the traditional DiFranco: those snappy lyrics coupled with a buoyant melody, as in the song "Garden of Simple," to make it a smooth transition.

As with any double-disc album, there's always the most-listened-to disc and the forgotten one - in my case, I found myself listening to *Revelling* more. This CD is supposed to be more of a musical exploration, more fun and more of DiFranco just playing and having a good time.

*Reckoning*, on the other hand, is the more introspective disc, and thus slower and quieter. It is pretty, but the tracks have a tendency to run into one another - she is sad and contemplative, she is bemoaning capitalism and America, there's a sprinkling of broad cultural complaints ... okay, she's still sad and contemplative ...

That's the major weakness of the album: no songs really stand out enough to be single-worthy and no tunes really get caught in your head.

But the weak points don't outweigh the good. DiFranco can be funny, she has a real sense of language and her voice still has that wonderful half-husky,

half-sultry edge to it. She tries new things - like mixing in an answering machine message on the track "Kazooinit."

And if nothing else, people should buy this album because of its fabulous packaging. It's an intricate fold-out thing with two little books of lyrics and some sleek photos that, as a friend observed, look a lot like Gap ads (in the most complimentary sense).

My prediction is that this album will be a huge hit with DiFranco fans - but then what album is not to that loyal crowd?

As for the rest of us, it's a pretty solid (though not spectacular) indication as to why DiFranco is such a persistent force in the music world.

Joanna Pearson

## Tin Can Jam Band Tin Can Jam

★★★ 1/2

If you listen closely to the Spice Girls' first album, you'll find the songs fit together like a sonnet cycle tracking the ups and downs of a romantic relationship.

This gives Spice a decided lyrical advantage over Tin Can Jam's seven-song self-titled debut.

Tin Can Jam plays bluesy Southern rock with a country twang, a genre that has a tendency toward inconsequential lyrics (i.e. Widespread Panic, .38 Special, etc.). As with lyrics, Tin Can Jam's strengths and weaknesses correspond with those typical of Southern rock.

Themes range from the summertime "just stay with me tonight" lovin' in "Thrill" to "Southern Georgia growin' up days" in "Georgia." The spacey "Tattletales" asks you to "Climb aboard your ship of dreams/ Where nothing's ever what it seems."

"Tattletales" is the album's best song, highlighted by lovely vocal harmonies against a mystical backdrop. It weaves Widespread-style funk with the offbeat '70s stoner-rock of Joe Walsh, followed by a faster jam.

The three-part harmony also works well in "Rain," characterized by the fairly big sound of a six-piece band. (They've added a sax since recording the album.) Lead singer/acoustic gui-

tarist John Jemsek's voice sounds good here and in tunes like "Autumn Soul Fishing," but mysteriously comes out weak and raspy in "Thrill" and "Had Me."

Jemsek's playing forms a fairly solid basis for the largely acoustic-driven tunes, which sound like the Pat McGee Band and old-school Santana when they're good, and like Weekend Excursion and the washed-up 21st century Allman Brothers when not.

A heavy Widespread Panic influence can be found in all of the songs, especially in Mike Yanoski's percussion playing and Mark Kline's lead guitar.

Aside from the lyrics, the songs are, for the most part, well-written and well-played, but offer no surprises. Several of the tunes, including "Said the Sinner," leave you wondering why they need that many instruments to play what they're playing, but they are still respectable.

In terms of respectability, Tin Can Jam definitely holds the upper hand against the Spice Girls. Unfortunately, that doesn't say a whole lot.

Warren Wilson

## WXYC 89.3 Top Ten

March 25-31

1. Stephen Malkmus - Stephen Malkmus (Matador)
2. Phillip Johnston - Normalogy (Koch)
3. Ike Turner & His Kings of Rhythm - Ike's Instrumentals (Ace)
4. Magic Sam - The Essential Magic Sam: The Cobra and Chief Recordings 1957-1961 (Fuel 2000)
5. Tortoise - Standards (Thrill Jockey)
6. Various Artists - Ethiopiques Vol. 9 (Buda)
7. Breakestra - The Live Mix Part 2 (Stone's Throw)
8. Felix Baloy - Baila mi son (Tumi)
9. Topsy - Uh-Oh! (Asphodel)
10. Compay Segundo - Las Flores de la Vida (Nonesuch)

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