

Otis Rerelease Exudes Underappreciated Talent, Ingenuity

Shuggie Otis
Inspiration Information
★★★★ 1/2

Sifting through the dusty bins of the record store that is music history, every now and then you'll come across something special nestled among the rows upon rows of mediocrity, a forgotten gem that slipped through the cracks.

Luaka Bop has brought to light one of those gems with its rerelease of Shuggie Otis' magnificent 1974 album, *Inspiration Information*.

Californian guitarist Otis recorded and toured with several well-known bands. The Rolling Stones offered him the spot left by Mick Taylor's departure, but Otis declined. Shuggie was all about doing his own thing. And *Inspiration Information* is the culmination of Otis' thing.

If you find Otis filed under "blues" at your record store, don't expect to hear Howlin' Wolf or Eric Clapton. Think more along the lines between Curtis Mayfield and Stereolab.

Inspiration Information was an album by an artist truly ahead of his time. The record's 13 tracks are a bizarre blend of funky R&B, blues guitar, psychedelic pop, and the very beginnings of drum machine technology. Otis, a veritable one-man band, wrote and played almost all of the music himself.

The album opens with the title track, a bouncy funk number. Wah-wah guitar, organ and a funky bassline create a '70s soul-boogie ambience that has a strangely modern feel. Other funk tracks, like "Sparkle City," or "Not Available" get down to a beat similar to the ones Mayfield and Sly Stone were playing at the time, but have an intangible futuristic quality to them.

Most of the tracks on *Inspiration Information* have a similar sense of coming from some kind of weird future-past. While they do have a '70s feel to them, they're at times more similar to the ironic nostalgia-driven bricolage of Beck than to most pop music from Otis' peers.

His use of the newborn drum machine technology only adds to that sense. "Aht Uh Mi Hed" (pronounced "outta my head"), an ethereal boogie-ballad, is driven by a series of strange clip-clop beats backed by strings, organs and real drums. The result sounds like something out of a 21st-century "Superfly" remake. Other tracks like "XL-30," "Ice Cold Daydream" and "Pling!" sound futuristic even today, with their use of minimal drum box beats, warm organ sounds and synthesizers.

But *Inspiration Information* isn't so spaced out that it's not accessible. In fact, the sunny pop jewel "Strawberry Letter 23" topped the charts when the Brothers Johnson covered it in the summer of 1977. An infectious melody, organ, chimes and a dance-friendly beat drive the song to a psychedelic crescendo. Why the song had to wait for the Brothers Johnson's cover for commercial success is a mystery to this reviewer.

Really, that same question kept popping up throughout every listen. Why is Shuggie Otis not a superstar? It seems the only people aware of *Inspiration Information* were other musicians.

Otis' experiments with new technologies and melding of various genres and influences are fascinating, like looking at a fossil in the evolutionary development of pop music. He's not quite the missing link but definitely is some kind of wonderful anomaly in the R&B family tree.

After *Inspiration Information* bombed and Elektra dropped him, Otis returned to the studio once. His tale of unappreciated genius is more than a little similar to that of a certain Dutch painter with one ear. But Otis is still alive, and as far as I know has both ears. I hope he can finally hear all the praises he so truly deserves.

Brian Bedworth

Old 97s
Satellite Rides
★★★ 1/2

Now that the alt-country revival is on its second decade, *Satellite Rides* finds the Dallas-based Old 97s shifting towards the pop-rock end of the genre's spectrum.

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The band debuted in 1995, the same year the much-acclaimed Wilco released its first album, Old 97s hasn't achieved anything approaching the latter's recognition.

Wilco has moved ever closer to pure pop, while Old 97s has retained a definite country edge with that certain sound lent doses of slide guitar and lap steel.

And *Satellite Rides* is heavy on Americana, from songs inspired by J.D. Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye" ("Rollerskate Skinny") to odes to dying Southern towns ("Buick City Complex").

But several tracks venture distinctly into pop-punk territory, with pounding guitars and vigorous sing-along choruses like that of "Book of Poems." Others, like "Weightless," are more simply pop.

Satellite Rides lacks the heavy-handed production of 1999's *Fight Songs*, which results in a less rich sound that may be more to the liking of purists.

In fact, the most pared-down track is the album's gem: the acoustic "Question," a plaintive marriage proposal vignette.

Singer/songwriter Rhett Miller, however, is not a happy-go-lucky guy. Don't let the celebratory tone of the album's opener, "King of the World," fool you; he's obsessed with love gone wrong.

He puts his disaffection to good use, however, crafting it into well-turned phrases like "I left you last night on the left half/Of the bed that used to be mine/The way that you sleep is the image I'll keep/Always on the edge of my mind."

Miller's imperfect voice phrases his

lyrics in a slightly off way that is part endearing, part grating, and it's a big part of what characterizes the quartet's sound.

Fight Songs offered more energy and stronger, if slicker, tracks. But *Satellite Rides* is still an enjoyable piece of work, full of power pop songs with a twang — songs that could work on top 40 or country stations, if either were a little bit more hip.

Ashley Atkinson

Daft Punk
Discovery
★★★★

Hell yeah! Parisian techno group Daft Punk is back in the limelight with its first release in four years — *Discovery*, an electronically driven mix of 1970s rock and exceptionally groove-worthy Euro-pop.

Discovery kicks off with the happy-go-lucky celebration of dance clubs around the world "One More Time." Featuring vocals by *Discovery* co-producer Romanthony, "One More Time" evokes memories of funky white boy John Travolta and his tight white bell-bottoms from "Saturday Night Fever." Get down with your bad self.

On "Digital Love," Daft Punk breaks out the psychedelic sounds of Peter

Frampton, melding them with a hard dance beat and samples from George Duke's "I Love You More." Along with the instrumentals "Aerodynamic" and "Voyager," expect "Digital Love" to be on DJs' turntables in the very near future.

Daft Punk slows things down on "Something About Us" a sensual, soon-to-be-heard-in-the-background-of-your-favorite-porn-flick-tune and the soothing, heartbeat-paced "Nightvision."

But don't let these brief moments to rest fool you — there's plenty more to excite the mighty listener's eardrums.

"Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger" features digitally orchestrated vocals (trust me, it ain't *nothing* like Cher) layered over spunky keyboards and bass. You'll have to make it through 96 cymbal crashes in the first two minutes, however, to get to the good stuff. Bummer.

The only true bomb on the album is "Verdis Quo." A nearly six minute long form of torture, "Verdis Quo" has only four really annoying notes in the main harmony which is repeated at least a million times. Skip this track or use it drive your roommate crazy, I don't care which.

Putting its lyrical skill to work, Daft Punk wraps up *Discovery* with the song to mend all relationships, "Face to Face," and

the Motown-based "Too Long." Todd Edwards, another *Discovery* co-producer and remix engineer of Tuff Jam's 1998 album *Need Good Love*, takes up the vocals on "Face to Face," singing "I realized you weren't wrong/It was a mere illusion."

But *Discovery* is no illusion. So commend the French for producing something worthwhile and head to your local record store *tout de suite*.

Sarah Kucharski

this week

■ **Slow Children Playing, Friday at Carolina Coffee Shop.** Rock, blues and groove from UNC students. 942-6875.

■ **Crooked Fingers, Friday at Cat's Cradle.** One of Chapel Hill's favorites sons, ex-Archers of Loaf front man Eric Bachmann, returns with his new melancholy sound. 967-9053.

■ **Melvins, Folk Implosion, Saturday at Cat's Cradle.** The Melvins are one of the few original grunge bands left. Folk Implosion is Lou Barlow's (Sebadoh) eclectic side project. 967-9053.

■ **"All's Well That Ends Well," opens Wednesday at Playmakers Theatre.** Shakespeare's romantic comedy is the last production of the Playmakers season. 962-7529.

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top ten April 1-7

1. **Ike Turner & His Kings of Rhythm** - Ike's Instrumentals (Ace)
2. **Wagon Christ** - Musipal (Ninja Tune)
3. **V/A** - Ethiopiques Vol. 9 (Buda)
4. **Go! Team** - 'Get it Together!' 7-inch (Pickled Egg)
5. **Matmos** - A Chance to Cut is a Chance to Cure (Matador)
6. **Scratch Pet Land** - solo soli iiiiii (Sonig)
7. **Breakestra** - The Live Mix Part 2 (Stone's Throw)
8. **Cex** - Get Your Badass On EP (555)
9. **Stephen Malkmus** - s/t (Matador)
10. **V/A** - Grazing in the Trash Vol. 1 (Soul Fire)