

Bjork Adds Clarity to Emotional Landscapes

By MICHAEL ABERNETHY
Assistant Arts & Entertainment Editor

Bjork drops the fairy schtick to play psychoanalyst.

Her first two efforts, 1993's *Debut* and 1995's *Post*, left Bjork looking like a tap-dancing pixie as she genre-hopped from dance to electronica to big band and a cappella balladry. In 1997, *Homogenic* saw her remake herself into a Scandinavian dominatrix on an orchestral high.

But *Vespertine*, her first full-length album in four years, finds Bjork leaving behind the artifice that previously shrouded her work in mystery in favor of experimenting with a more personal mood.

This is the sound of sunlight glinting off of a polar ice cap. Throughout, skeletal

arrangements of icy beats and fuzzy-synth loops combine with fairy-tale swellings of strings, choirs and music boxes, creating an airy space for Bjork's angelic voice to inhabit.

For the first time, Bjork eschews her usual vocal gymnastics and fits of Icelandic howling in favor of a more straightforward delivery. This sonic restraint leaves an intimate space between Bjork and the listener, and she employs this closeness in order to quietly emphasize her poetic lyrics.

The album opens with "Hidden Place," a mantra that finds Bjork tucking all her passions and raw emotions into a secret place inside. In "It's Not Up To You" Bjork battles her neurotic desire to control her life: "I can decide what I give/But it's not up to me/What I get given."

But the most private revelation on *Vespertine* is the whispered "Cocoon." "He slides inside/Half awake half

asleep/We faint back into sleep-hood/When I wake up the second time in his arms/Gorgeousness: he's still inside me!!" This is the recorded equivalent of Bjork pressing her lips to your ear and confiding a secret to you.

Though all these tender moments of revelation are endearing, they are also more than a little disarming. In choosing to release her own classified information, Bjork is revealing experiences that aren't normally discussed between the closest of friends or family. And this from an artist who, in the past, seemed to wear so many masks. It's strange to find out that this is who she really is.

As the listener is treated to the aural essence of Bjork, they are also given privy to some of the best music of the Icelandic songstress' career. On "Pagan Poetry," Bjork opens her mouth to the most expressive melody her lips have ever curled themselves around, its labyrinthian harps twinkling like

snowflakes falling on glass. Other gems, like the sci-fi folktale "Heirloom" and the drifting "Aurora," further prove that Bjork is on the top of her game here.

But at other times, all this emotional effort feels overwrought. "Hidden Place," with its repetitive groove and empty shape, is a weak choice for a lead single. And even after repeated listenings, "Harm of Will" feels aimless and ploddingly difficult to sit through.

On *Vespertine*, Bjork manages to separate herself from most emotive artists in the music industry. Instead of simply relying on her emotional turmoil to fuel the songwriting process, Bjork uses these songs to express her joy and exuberance for living.

With *Vespertine*, Bjork is telling the world how happy she is to have finally found clarity and peace within herself.

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Fresh from her acting stint in "Dancer in the Dark," Bjork returns from the studio with a newfound vocal directness on *Vespertine*.

New Zealand Band Looks East; David Makes Novice Debut; Beulah Channels Brian Wilson

The Clean
Getaway
★★★★☆

I thought it would be clever and witty to give The Clean's new album, *Getaway*, a first listen while cleaning my house. I always need a soundtrack to dusting and sweeping, and this album seemed better than most for obvious reasons.

The Clean blend catchy head bobbing beats, fuzzy guitar distortion, a few sing-along melodies, some electronic blips and a hint of Eastern music to create the soundtrack to a lazy summer day.

Catchy enough to distract me from the monstrous dust bunnies on top of my fan, yet engaging enough to still be interesting, *Getaway* is perfect cleaning music.

Airy, yet sophisticated indie pop, *Getaway* is The Clean's fourth full-length recording and their first in three years. The New Zealand trio has also released countless EPs, singles and compilation tracks and is considered South Pacific rock royalty at home.

Sounding like something between Lou Reed and Beck, guitarist David Kilgore's lackadaisical lyrics glide effortlessly through the mix. His brother and

band drummer Hamish's bassy voice balances out the sound on several tracks.

Bassist Robert Scott sings on two tracks as well, one of which is one of the album's best. "E Motel" is a solid Celtic/Americana-via-New Zealand rocker. The crisp production and infectious melody bring to mind Rod Stewart's "Maggie May" but in a good way.

Another standout, "Jala" displays some heavy Eastern influences. An Indian-sounding beat and hypnotic bass line pulse under David Kilgore's repeated chant of "How could you forget love?" Guitars, Eastern stringed instruments and electronics create more of a mood than an actual song.

The Eastern feel continues on forgettable tunes "Alpine Madness" and "Circle Canyon," which feature Yo La Tengo's Ira Kaplan and Georgia Hubley. The songs could be throwaways from Yo La Tengo's *And Then Nothing Turned Itself Inside Out*.

But the album's closer, "Complications," is by far the catchiest track. Like The Beach Boys as an amped-up garage rock band, The Clean tear through the rocker, complete with piano and jingle bells.

It's not hard to see why The Clean has been celebrated as a treasure of New Zealand's musical history. Solid, sunny and innovative, the band's brand of organic music sounds fresh and timeless. If I kept reviewing CDs like this, my house would probably be a lot cleaner.

By Brian Bedsworth

Craig David
Born to Do It
★★★★☆

The achievement of stardom in the United Kingdom offers no promise of equal glory for singers and musical acts aspiring for fame in the United States.

Fortunately, Craig David shows more promise than some of his predecessors. The 20-year-old exploded onto U.K. charts in March 2000, becoming the youngest British man to score a No. 1 hit when his debut single "Fill Me In" entered at the top spot.

Contending for an American audience, David mixes self-penned lyrics with R&B, hip hop and British dance music to create a fresh, palatable sound that gives listeners just a taste of what he's capable of doing — think Donell Jones meets electronica.

A former DJ discovered by Mark Hill (one half of British production duo The Artful Dodger), David draws from a variety of musical styles to create smooth, danceable tracks, such as "7 Days," which pairs catchy pop lyrics with subtle Spanish-style guitar riffs.

But the album seems overproduced at times, with David's lyrics getting lost among the synthesized instrumentals and the choruses' excessive reverb. A vocal effect similar to that in "Do You Believe (In Life After Love)," it can only be used so many times before you begin to question the artist's ingenuity, not to mention taste.

The album's low point — and an ugly glimpse of David's still-maturing songwriting — comes out in "Booty Man," a tired portrayal of playas as admirable guys. It's hard to take him seriously as an artist while he's crooning, "Click off, click on www.cd.com/ International bomb, the booty man's really got it going on."

David does redeem himself in the album's sensual, reflective ballads. From the slow, sexual "Follow Me" to the broken-hearted sentiment of "Key to My Heart," David's smooth, soulful voice dips and soars with emotion.

With the success of one album and a promising talent, David has great potential — here's hoping he doesn't suffer a fate similar to that of the Spice Girls.

By Harmony Johnson

Beulah
The Coast is Never Clear
★★★★☆

Apples in Stereo, Neutral Milk Hotel, Olivia Tremor Control — no, not mixed drinks but the names a few bands in the Elephant 6 collective. For the uninitiated, Elephant 6 is a loose collection of bands that make music as if 1967 never ended.

Elephant 6 isn't just an adjective, however, it's also a stamp of quality. One of the latest and best groups under the umbrella is Beulah, a San Francisco band that made a splash with 1999's outstanding sophomore release *When Your Heartstrings Break*.

The band delivers another stand-out album with the new *The Coast is Never Clear*, a beach-breezy love letter of a record. If R.E.M.'s *Reveal* was a beginning-of-summer album, then this is an ode to the lazy days at the end of the summer, a September wolf whistle.

Unlike some of their artier Elephant 6

mates, Beulah doesn't sacrifice songs for style. Songwriter Miles Kurosky applies his neo-Beach Boys flourishes only after creating a strong batch of melodies both lilting and rollicking. As such, the tunes on *The Coast is Never Clear* seem as endearingly familiar as they do fresh.

Songs like "Gravity's Bringing Us Down" and "Hey Brother" are perfect pop: beautiful, catchy and even intelligent. Kurosky starts off with a dose of Brian Wilson harmonies, then adds some surf guitar and fuzzy bass, plus a dash of horns and violins and cooks for a few minutes.

The sunset-on-the-beach sound is complemented by Kurosky's longing lyrics. "Burned by the Sun," "Gene Autry" and "What Will You Do When the Sun Fades?" continue the leaving-the-coast vibe. California, parties, orange suns and sand — it's dusk at the beach, and the songs are a lazy high.

Like a lot of the best music today, you won't catch Beulah on the radio, but maybe that's not such a bad thing. Where they really belong is playing at beachfront parties to twisting surfers in remakes of those '60s Frankie and Annette flicks.

By Brian Millikin

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