

Amos' 'Walk' Across America Tells Universal Story of Tragedy, Hope

By MICHAEL ABERNETHY
Senior Writer

The problem with the United States' reaction to Sept. 11 is that we don't want to look at the big picture.

While the same obvious signs of vacuous social attitude exist as before the attacks, pop culture and the media would have us believe that we are a changed people — that terrorism and Bruce Springsteen's increased relevance have cleansed us as a nation and have made us see the error of our ways.

But Tori Amos knows differently.

Her new album, *Scarlet's Walk*, doesn't so much examine the terrorist attacks as it indicts our nation for its historical wrongs and conceits in light of 9/11.

Porn stars, racism, homophobia, al-Qaida and repercussions of the Trail of Tears and the Civil War all hold equal weight in Amos' America.

But as is the norm with any of her works, listeners get heaping spoonfuls of the songwriter's own peculiar interpretation of events.

Thematically, the album is Amos' most brilliant to date.

It builds on the challenges and characters she met on her national tour after Sept. 11, following autobiographical character Scarlet on her journey through all 50 states.

In each region, Amos offers examples of that area's culture and characters with interjections of her own commen-

tary.

But musically, *Scarlet's Walk* is the first album in her career that doesn't break any new ground. Throughout, she plays to her strengths — the melodic Kate Bushisms that marked her first two albums and the lyrical quirks of *Boys for Pele*.

Although this makes for a solid album, one can't help but miss the chances she's taken on her last few albums.

The completely unexpected dance beats of "Raspberry Swirl" lit up 1998's masterful *From the Choirgirl Hotel*, and the eerie ambience of "Suede" was the highlight of *To Venus and Back*.

But the album does provide several career highlights for Amos.

Its first single, the floating, über-melodic "A Sorta Fairytale," is the finest single Amos has provided since *Choirgirl's* "Jackie's Strength."

Likewise, the radio-ready "Taxi Ride" excels with the songwriter's blatant cynicism in lines such as, "This thing you call love/She smiles way too much."

But fittingly, Amos' attempt at grappling specifically with Sept. 11 is the most stirring and poignant moment on the album.

In "I Can't See New York," she deftly sums up the feelings of loss and lack of direction our nation felt those few weeks

after the attacks. "From here no lines are drawn/From here no lands are owned/13,000 and holding/Swallowed in the purring of her engines," Amos coos in the opening strains.

The only fault of the album is that, at 18 tracks, it's just too long. *Scarlet's Walk* is rounded out brilliantly with dynamic character studies such as "Mrs. Jesus" and the aching title track. But Amos' focus gets lost somewhere between the yawn-inspiring "Don't Make Me Come to Vegas," the murky "Sweet Sangria" and the aimless "Your Cloud."

But the beauty of *Scarlet's Walk* is the redemption that its central character and Amos find in the album's conclusion. Like life, tragedy is only half the story.

In "Gold Dust," the album's closer, Amos reflects on her travels and concludes with life-affirming conviction that the future of America is in our hands. In Amos' hands, the statement is neither cloying nor clichéd.

And like those of *Little Earthquakes* and *Songs From the Choirgirl Hotel*, *Scarlet's* songs will undoubtedly deepen in meaning over time.

For by avoiding jingoistic attempts at writing a new national anthem in attempts to make the political personal, Amos' novella-in-song *Scarlet's Walk* offers the most universal statement she ever has made.

The Arts & Entertainment Editor can be reached at artsdesk@unc.edu.

MC Paul Barman
Paullelujah
★★★★☆

Some artists have too much fun.

The Beastie Boys initially took having fun to the top of the charts with more raunch and humor than had ever come before. If you all remember the *Slim Shady LP*, Eminem used to have a more pronounced sense of humor before the spotlight pounced on him.

Following in their footsteps — although apparently more verbose than even they are — is MC Paul Barman. Barman's third album, *Paullelujah*, matches his off-kilter flow with its own fairly appealing productions in an album that refuses to let you get too serious.

The album's title track is a joke of wordplay with an easy beat that evokes smiles from those wanting some hip hop to do nothing but make them laugh.

"Cock Mobster" is an honest come-on to various actresses and divas from Sigourney Weaver to Winona Ryder to Teri Garr. Seemingly no actress is spared — even though several should be.

On "Old Paul," Barman flows about his fear of the present, in which "Rap is scary/It's about to go pop," over a track right out of a spaghetti Western.

On "Bleeding Brain Grow," produced by long-time collaborator and hip-hop producer Prince Paul, Barman declares, "I want a sista, not a shiksa," as well as his lack of love for conservatives.

"Excuse You" is a retro-style track that sounds like the Beasties in their early years. Barman sings, "I'm iller than the Iliad.../If you think you think outside the box, you're trapped in one."

One of the album's definite highlights, "Anarchist Bookstore, Pt. 1," features a jazzy vibe created by live instrumentation. Subtle electric piano lines along with Barman's confidently geeky flow, which never trips itself up, making this track the centerpiece of the album.

"A Somewhat New Medium," the closer, centers on Barman's pseudo-beat poetry and a loose bass and piano groove that recalls a Blaxpotation film

score and the Beasties' *Check Your Head and Ill Communication*.

Ultimately, *Paullelujah* is not unappealing, depending on one's mood or what someone wants from a listening.

It might be easy to dismiss the record as a cheesy, exclusively student-friendly record. This may be true to an extent, given Barman's style and flow — the latter of which sounds like a dictionary in a blender or words pulled out of a hat.

But Barman is able to pull the whole thing off, largely based on his apparent sincerity and the depth of his lyrics, which — appearances aside — talk about everything from sex to race to politics while never seeming too preachy.

Ultimately, Barman's flow and the album's underground sensibilities succeed in posing a unique dilemma — are the listeners supposed to nod their heads or laugh out loud?

By Tacque Kirksey

Matt Pond PA
The Nature of Maps
★★★★☆

The Nature of Maps, the latest album by Matt Pond PA, conjures the feeling of the winter landscapes its lyrics often describe — inspiring in its beauty and slightly dizzying.

Strings spiral like snowflakes, blanketing the arrangements in symphonic depth. The lyrics are plaintive and longing for summer's warmth. Lovely and removed, the album is an authoritative treatise on loneliness without feeling self-absorbed.

In short, it's a remarkable effort.

Composed of two cellists, a drummer, bassist and guitarist, Matt Pond PA strives to sound more like a symphony than a run-of-the-mill rock band. It succeeds with flourishes like an ethereal harp backing on "Athabasca" and the throbbing vibraphone chord that ushers in "Summer Is Coming."

Each of these embellishments, perfectly placed, combines for a haunting statement that reverberates long after the album's final notes fade.

Frontman and guitarist Matt Pond plays host over the festivities, grounding the album in rock roots while letting its symphonic aspirations soar. Pond might sound like your average tortured indie rocker, but his melodies and lyrics feature a seductive simplicity that juxtapose the intricacy of their arrangements.

From the dirge-like "The Party" to the spiraling waltz of "Summer Is Coming," each of the songs on *The Nature of Maps* seems an extension of the others, all playing on similar themes and images — falling leaves, lingering lights and solitude ("So silence is the way/Of breaking up the days," Pond intones in "Close Map").

Some songs, such as "New Kehoe NJ" and the archly titled "A Million Middle Fingers," are more brief snippets than fully-realized songs. "No More (Again)" is an instrumental reprise of the earlier "No More," an impressive and almost operatic touch. The end result of these orchestral flourishes is an album that both captivates and subdues, a work of wintry desperation that refuses to give up on the spring.

The breathtaking final song on the

LP, "Athabasca," ends with an urging to "Follow back into past winter time/Back to fall, back to those early summers."

We would do just that if only this album would let us from its grip.

By Jill Spivey

Minus the Bear
Highly Refined Pirates
★★★★☆

If robots could dance, Minus the Bear's *Highly Refined Pirates* would be disc one in their multi-disc robo-stereo.

Pursuing a route of mechanical beats, precise rhythms and seamlessly clean vocals, the quintet's aptly titled release negotiates 14 crisp tracks with a clear agenda — deliver an expanding interpretation of rock in the tradition of Fugazi and Queens of the Stone Age.

But take a moment to digest the instrumental nuances — the single-note repetition of the bass line is a framework that's engineered and efficient. The technical, high-pitched guitar noodling and keyboard ambience are a texture that is electronic and enveloping. The tight drumbeat is a mechanism that sets its standards by the end of the first song, closing it with defined intensity.

By the third song you also realize that despite its rigid structure, the band plays by its own rules. It defies convention with odd changes in time signature, distinctive shuffling beats, an infrequently rhyming lyric meter and occasional bridges played in a God-knows-what scale. As icing on the cake, songs on the album are segued by instrumental interludes that sound amusingly new age.

Minus the Bear is indeed something of a technical machine, but it's a machine possessed by quirk and emotion.

Singer Jake Snider's refined vocals are brimming with fervor and bitter-sweet meaning. This is the stuff of nocturnal introspection after those nights of finding love with someone new. This is the stuff of experience gleaned in every day's misfortune.

The album's closer, "Let's Play Guitar in a Five Guitar Band," is all nostalgia — "A few summers ago/We spent weeks in her room/Just having sex and listening to jazz/And that was the life."

Emotional culmination in the choruses is controlled but fervent — Snider lets loose without surrendering a moment of pitch.

But Minus the Bear is not your typical derivative melodrama. It recognizes that music is not just a backdrop for vocalists' soapbox and knows the limits of decency.

Observe the absurdly irrelevant song titles, for instance, and you'll notice the band's subtle humor serving as chasers to the shots of poignancy. A song about a midnight car ride along a lakeshore is titled "Monkey!!! Knife!!! Fight!!!" while the lyric-less song four, soothing and sedate, is "Hey, Wanna Throw Up?"

Highly Refined Pirates is a solid release from a young band that's fresh but still learning. The album doesn't redefine versatility or innovation, but it's nevertheless a noteworthy step toward that end.

So, uh, rock and roll.
By Brandon Whiteside



Tori Amos
Scarlet's Walk
★★★★☆

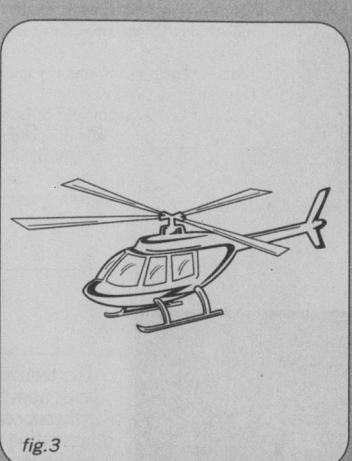
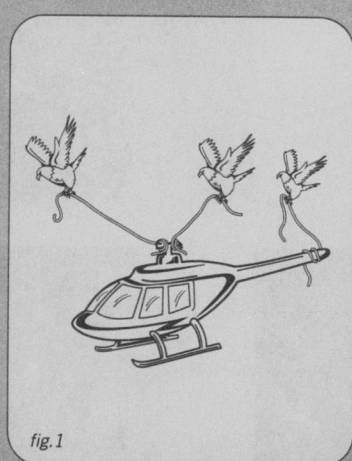
Tori Amos



Scarlet's Walk

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