

O'Connor Captures Same Energy in Softer Package; Matchbox Fails to Make 'More'

Sinéad O'Connor
Sean-Nós Nua
★★★★

Don't be fooled by the soft surface of *Sean-Nós Nua* – Sinéad O'Connor still touts her defiance and her politics. Her message just has matured, becoming less overt with time.

Through the ups and downs of O'Connor's musical career, the Irish singer has been anything but dulcet and soft-spoken. Her refusal to perform at a New Jersey venue if "The Star Spangled Banner" was played earned criticism from both the public and industry – Frank Sinatra even threatened to "kick her ass."

O'Connor tore up a picture of Pope John Paul II on "Saturday Night Live" and boycotted the Grammys and MTV, earning her a place on the list of music's most controversial figures. But one wouldn't think so from *Sean-Nós Nua*.

Unlike her intensely personal albums, including 1990's *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got*, her memorable *Gospel Oak* from 1997 and 2000's *Faith and Courage*, O'Connor's newest release initially seems to lack charge and self-focus. But *Sean-Nós Nua*, translated as "old style but new," has as much to do with the singer as any of her early work.

O'Connor takes 13 traditional Irish songs and infuses them with her distinctive voice, touches of electronic and old-fashioned instrumentals. The product is a hauntingly beautiful and impassioned but seemingly comfortable album.

Until one looks closer, that is. Like the tracks on Tori Amos' *Strange Little Girls*, many of O'Connor's songs of choice were originally sung by men. "Peggy Gordon" at first told of a man's love for his wife or lover. Tremulously sung by O'Connor, it becomes an expression of homosexual love in genteel ballad form. "Her Mantle So Green" tells the story

of a man coming home from war in disguise to see if his woman was true. O'Connor's sly singing expresses her disdain for trickery while showing her love for traditional Irish storytelling. Songs are given a new spin by O'Connor's ever-changing vocals – she travels from wispy, feminine trilling to harsher, critical intonations that stretch her voice.

The electronic elements merged with acoustic guitars and quintessentially Irish melodies in songs like "The Moorlough Shore" and "Paddy's Lament" provide eclectic backdrops to lessons about love, loss, patriotism and pride. And closing track "I'll Tell Me Ma" ends with what is, perhaps, the question O'Connor has been asking about herself all along – "Please won't you tell me who is she?"

With extreme subtlety and undeniable beauty, O'Connor allows her views to seep into song instead of enforcing her perspectives and allowing them to minimize the importance of the music.

The oxymoronic gentle force of *Sean-Nós Nua* demonstrates that O'Connor has learned a lesson long ago spoken by Teddy Roosevelt – "Speak softly and carry a big stick."

By Michelle Jarboe

Craig David
Slicker Than Your Average
★★★★

Listening to Craig David's new album, *Slicker Than Your Average*, is like eating a grocery store sheet cake. You know what you're getting, it tastes pretty good and it feeds everyone.

It's also nothing too special.

After the success of his debut album, *Born to Do It* – which snagged him a Grammy nomination and international fanfare as the newest bridge between the U.K. and U.S. pop scenes – David is at

point in his career where he needs to prove himself as a pop innovator and not just another idol. Too bad he starts off with such a tacky title.

The title track actually indicates there's a little more to David than the cover art might suggest. He works his tender voice over a pulsing, funky beat with a surprising amount of soul, but the "don't hate me cause I'm famous" mantra he harps on is pretty stale.

If this was the only song in which David was worrying about gold diggers, celebrity status and his role as a musical ambassador, *Slicker Than Your Average* could be taken as a disclaimer. But the later presence of "Eenie Meenie," "Rise & Fall" and "World Filled With Love" proves it to be more of a prelude.

In general, it's a good policy not to pay too much attention to any of David's lyrics, which alternate between his vain self-consciousness and the standard hot-girl-at-the-club fare. But his music works when the atmosphere of the song takes over, running on a pop formula that fuses his supple voice with a solid dance beat. You might call him Justin Timberlake's British cousin.

Consequently, the album's highlights are the songs that don't stray too far from the dance floor. Most of these are fun, bouncy and in some ways derivative.

The LP's first single, "What's Your Flava?" works in a Euro-beat mode not too different from Madonna's "Music" and "Die Another Day." "Fast Cars" cashes in on the glam of "The Fast and the Furious" but in a way that makes you hope they make this one into a music video. It's the kind of stuff that makes "TRL" fun to watch.

The middle of the album suffers from uninspired R & B drivel, namely the raunchy sex ballad "Personal." This is the sort of song someone like David desper-

ately needs to avoid lest we witness the birth of yet another R. Kelly. Beautiful voices don't always make for great artists.

David is clearly working his American appeal, picking up slang that has no place in the British Isles. With five-0 instead of bobbies and bucks instead of quid, he fades into a bland copy of something we already know.

Overall, *Slicker* shows promise, but not enough to make you too optimistic. There are a lot of potential hits on the album, but given the current pop landscape, that's not saying much. In the future, David needs to worry less about his critics and more about his music, which ultimately stands for itself.

By Erin Sullivan

Ms. Jade
Girl Interrupted
★★★★

What does a girl have to do to make it in the rap industry these days?

Ask up-and-coming artist Ms. Jade, and she'll probably tell her to team up with Timbaland.

This is because she wrote nearly every song on her debut, *Girl Interrupted*, with him. Though the album has strong undertones of gender equality and women's independence from men, Ms. Jade is being brought into the spotlight by a man.

The album is one big collaboration – Timbaland's sound dominates from track to track, and artists like Missy Elliott, Nelly Furtado, Jay-Z and Nate Dogg all add a little to the pot.

Big names are a big help to any up-and-coming artist, but Ms. Jade has a lot of excess to sift through in order to find her own voice. Nevertheless, she establishes herself as a force in the largely male-dominated hard-core rap industry, making the album a notable start.

The best moments come when Ms. Jade has a chance to shine and her voice isn't drowned out by her mentors. "Really Don't Want My Love," a

seamless collaboration with Missy Elliott, is one song on which her anger and frustration sound most earnest and her commanding voice is bound to turn heads.

On the understated but potent "Big Head," Timbaland's sound enhances Ms. Jade's without overpowering it. Ironically, she sings, "It's a Timb track, so you know it's tight," but it's these songs that establish her unique identity as an artist.

And on "Different," Ms. Jade melds rap and (surprisingly enough) '80s hair rock sounds to create a feminine force reminiscent of Pat Benatar or Joan Jett. As Ms. Jade raps about gender and racial inequality, her prowess develops further and it's easy to forget about Timbaland altogether. "It's time we take a stand/Focus on ourself and stop worrying about the next man... What else can I say?/I'm just a different kind of lady."

At times, though, other artists take too much away from Ms. Jade's style. Nelly Furtado's whine is unfortunately the center of attention on the infectiously catchy single "Ching Ching." And the too-busy "Dead Wrong" sounds like a song by Timbaland and Nate Dogg featuring Ms. Jade instead of vice versa.

All in all, it's a shame that it took so much outside contribution to bring out Ms. Jade, but her evident talent likely will carry her to a freer recording climate if she so chooses.

By Caroline Lindsey

Matchbox Twenty
More Than You Think You Are
★★★★

The title of Matchbox Twenty's newest album, *More Than You Think You Are*, perfectly describes the band's attempt to make an innovative record that ends up sounding much like its previous work.

The recent release appears to be the freshest culmination of the band's increasing reliance on studio production since 1996's *Yourself or Someone Like You*. An instrumental sideshow including

congos and a clavinet and other guest factors indicate the group's attempts to diversify – efforts that fall short of eye-popping.

Like the cracks a bullet makes in glass, the album's variations create a myriad of stunted paths. Matchbox Twenty can't seem to forge a solid new direction, so Rob Thomas and crew instead retreat to safe formulas of the past and make insignificant changes.

The CD is no masterpiece. For one, the band could better represent its new collection than with the first single, "Disease." In this track, Thomas and cowriter Mick Jagger weakly shadow Thomas' work with Carlos Santana. Meanwhile, lacking salsa beats, the rest of *More Than You Think You Are* stays away from "Smooth."

A few of the songs feature lyrics describing big-city melancholy and heart-break underscored by piano backup. The slower tempo, softer beat and introspective words of such songs ("Bright Lights," "The Difference") reveal nuances in Thomas' guttural whine that are buried by more aggressive tunes like "Disease."

Aside from that track and the humorously awkward "Downfall" – in which earnest gospel singers – yes, gospel singers – reply to "Be my savior/And I'll be your downfall," the songs merit a modicum of attention.

"Hand Me Down" is the best tune, including a mellotron that creates a church organ wall of sound and the chorus, "You're just one more hand-me-down/Cause no one's tried to give you what you need."

Ultimately, *More Than You Think You Are* needs passion. Thomas' distinct tongue-rolling tones and the group's pulsating guitar riffs attack without first identifying an object, an enemy or an emotion.

Listeners find themselves in a vacuum of melody similar to the eye of a hurricane – the generic lyrics and notes surround the emptiness, creating a heartless nowhere.

By Diane Eikenberry

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