

'Mission' rocks; 'Trance' trips

Dashboard Confessional
A MARK. A MISSION. A BRAND. A SCAR.
★★★★

It's hard to approach Dashboard Confessional's newest album — *A Mark. A Mission. A Brand. A Scar.* — without any bias.

First there's Chris Carrabba, the tattooed, acoustic-strumming emo force behind Dashboard. People are calling him a guitar hero. A guitar hero. A dubious distinction, have no doubt.

Then there are those lyrics. 2001's *The Places You Have Come to Fear the Most* had its missteps. The *So Impossible* EP, which arrived soon after, had enough groaners to induce asphyxiation.

Here's a gem from the EP's "Remember to Breathe": "Try on my blue shirt/She told me she liked it/She wonders what I'll wear/She knows just what she'll wear." Ouch. The tables might be turned against Carrabba off the bat, but the new album, despite its title, deserves a listen.

The first track, "Hands Down," starts with a strong, low-pitched guitar hook that's an attention grabber. And is that electric guitar?

"Safe from the earth and all the stupid questions:/... 'Hey, did you get some?'/Man, that is so dumb." Wait, he's actually being — funny?

The next track, "Rapid Hope Loss," features undeniable — that's right, undeniable — rocking out.

Where's the whining? The "Blackbird"-gone-wrong acoustic numbers — isn't that all he does?

Well, that's all he did. It's still Dashboard, but Carrabba's taken his sound in a new, richer direction, and the final effect is overly positive.

Granted, he's still no guitar hero, but *A Mark. A Mission. A Brand. A Scar.* is a more tangible, varied album than previous Dashboard efforts.

Acoustic song-lites such as the plucking "Ghost of a Good Thing" are more bearable when spaced with full-voiced numbers such as "Am I Missing," with its focused, round-style chorus.

The final track, "Several Ways to Die Trying," is a six-minute-plus number that builds to a pounding conclusion, an uncharacteristic end for Dashboard. It's a good thing.

Sometimes it's difficult to keep Carrabba from his old ways: On "Carry This Picture," he croons: "And color the coast with your smile/It's the most genuine thing that I've ever seen." Whoa there, tiger.

At least he's hung up his blue shirt.

By Philip McFee

Nicholas Payton
SONIC TRANCE
★★★★

Look up Nicholas Payton's latest release, *Sonic Trance*, on a music Web page, and you'll find it under "other jazz."

Indeed, it's not quite fusion, nor is it acid. But egad! — it is something of an oddity.

Don't expect a clear-cut collection of songs, crisply defined. Rather, *Sonic Trance* is a fog of jazzy ambience — an audio haze that absorbs the listener.

Payton leads on trumpet, cohering a band of six without overshadowing any member.

Differing from jazz tradition, no one in the band exchanges prominent solos in the music's foreground, instead melting into the music in more subtle fashion.

"Fela 1" is one of the album's finer tunes, showcasing Payton's versatility. Some sounds are more conventional, relative to the electronically synthesized wailing notes at the song's conclusion.

Other cuts lack such a distinguished focal point, giving the songs the feel of a collage. The tracks — some only a minute long, others running together or reprising tunes from earlier in the album — give a similar quality to *Sonic Trance* as a whole.

In addition, the record is surprisingly synthetic and electronic in texture, as if it were a remixed classic.

Since the album is seemingly postmodern, a little discernment is necessary to avoid overlooking any of its underlying components — like its array of drum work.

A synthetic, distinctively hip-hop beat lays down the frame at the onset of "Praelude," the album's opening song.

These beats carry over into other tracks, sometimes laced with salsa-inspired conga percussion, straying from orthodox jazz.

At other points, the snare is hard-hitting, more like rock than jazz. Yet tying it back to the classics is the retention of the loose, shuffling flexibility of the instrument.

The only exception is Payton's scatting on the song "Shabba Unranked," the vocals low and gruff in Louis Armstrong tradition.

Aside from such nods to his masters, Payton takes a definite step forward on *Sonic Trance*.

The compositions are unique, and their perspective — due to a production quality that's modern but at the same time rustically gritty — is novel.

It would be shortsighted to call the album anything less than progressive.

By Brandon Whiteside

Two High String Band
INSOFARSMUCH
★★★★

When music is doing its job it finds a habitat — a place for it to nestle its notes between the moments of our lives and highlight the mundane pleasures of life.

The band works pastorally with its simple, sun-soaked bluegrass, creating a sound on *Insoufarsmuch* that would accompany smoothly a few old friends sipping cheap beer on a lazy afternoon.

The Austin-based quartet, consisting of two guitars, stand-up bass and mandolin, relies on tight arrangements, solid playing and stunning instrumental work to define its sound. The group isn't pushy with its movement throughout the album. Instead, the members find simple grooves and let their sleepy style float comfortably.

The album follows a trend of skipping between instrumental cuts and simple lyric songs.

The title track opens it by passively forcing the listener into the album's temperament with a repetitious round that manages never to become monotonous. The song finds a hypnotically beautiful melody line that slides you straight into the "Bunkhouse Blues," an old-time cowboy song that isn't afraid of modernity.

After hearing bluegrass legend David Grisman's mandolin grace "Sonny's Ride," it seems apt that his former partner — the late Jerry Garcia — would also make some sort of guest appearance.

At the beginning of "Alabama Blues," Jerry's voice appears from six feet under.

The truth is in the liner notes. Billy Bright, the mandolin player, is able to fool the listener with his vocal similarity to Garcia. The uncanny resemblance strikes especially hard on tracks like "Alabama Blues," which seems to be missing from the Grateful Dead's catalog.

The only major shortcoming of the album is the Merle Haggard cover "Somewhere Between."

The song sounds like a mildly inebriated country song, but the lyrics are a sloppy stupor that wander the pages of prepubescent love notes.

Though the lyrics don't feature much cerebral wordplay, "You Can't Run Away From Your Feet" induces a chuckle by pointing out the obvious and works as an apology for the previous lyrics.

Two High String Band would resound softly around picturesque days if everyone had outdoor speakers and didn't denounce bluegrass because of stigmas.

By Kemp Baldwin

Tennessee-bred rockers blend garage, whiskey

BY MICHAEL PUCCI
ASSISTANT ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

Let's just get this out of the way right now — Kings of Leon's *Youth and Young Manhood* might be not only the most accomplished debut of the year, but also one of 2003's finest albums by anyone, period.

It's difficult to imagine many other bands recording with the same measure of complete confidence and with an arsenal of songs as potent as these.

Kings of Leon look and sound like a quintessential classic rock band. They've absorbed the seminal music of The Band, Creedence Clearwater Revival and Tom Petty, and they've created something that manages to sound entirely unique in contemporary rock.

They haven't seen the inside of a barber shop in some time, either.

The band is comprised of four Followills: three brothers and a first cousin. The brothers' father was a Pentecostal evangelist in Tennessee. Their exposure to religion, combined with a steady diet of Southern rock throughout childhood, shine through here.

The album opens with the dizzying three-minute blast "Red Morning Light" and never lets up, offering continuous sturdy rockers, with one outstanding exception.

"Trani," the album's centerpiece, is the sole ballad, and it's an absolute stunner. Featuring Caleb

MUSIC REVIEW
KINGS OF LEON
YOUTH AND YOUNG MANHOOD
★★★★

Followill's most emotional vocal performance (odes to transvestites are usually conducive to such moments of inspiration), it's the kind of song the Rolling Stones once were able to turn out effortlessly, like "No Expectations" or "Wild Horses."

Incapable of staying mellow for too long, the Followill Four follow with "California Waiting," a perfect, rollicking single that would have ruled the airwaves 30 years ago.

It's a breathtaking one-two punch that would be the high point of most other albums. The appeal of *Youth and Young Manhood*, however, is that such songs are merely par for the course.

Caleb's drunken vocal approach, which channels Tom Waits, is certainly an acquired taste. For the most part, his occasionally indecipherable singing is endearing.

Only on "Spiral Staircase," the album's lone outright failure, do his vocals become overbearing, as he screams nearly every lyric into oblivion.

But it's a small misstep on an otherwise wildly promising debut. Ultimately, the spirit of the



album, and the band, lies in its greatest, final song, "Holy Roller Novocaine."

Beginning only with 16-year-old Jared Followill's bass and brother Nathan's drumming, the song builds up, adding cousin Matthew's electric guitar, luring the listener in until it launches into its anthemic chorus, "Lord's gonna get us back/Lord's gonna get us back, I know, I know."

Written here, those might not seem like revelatory words, but in the context of this album, it's enough to convert even the most staunch nonbelievers.

Youth and Young Manhood would have been a great success in the early 1970s. We can hope only that Kings of Leon can achieve similar acclaim today.

Contact the A&E Editor at artsdesk@unc.edu.

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ARTS CAROLINA

FROM PAGE 5

which Brannock established to gain constant feedback from the various departments, died with Arts Carolina.

Brannock also had the benefit of a full-time position. Any attempt to organize Arts Carolina-style events — such as the Sept. 11 memorial circle of stones — will be an added responsibility.

"Amy did everything — generating ideas, creating a response to important issues," Ketch said. "I don't know how those things will continue. It would take several individuals adding commitment to already overly committed lives."

Even then, without a set budget or full-time leader, combined arts efforts seem like pipe dreams.

"Things will be harder because the cohesion and central arts fight is gone," said Casey Dunn, arts liaison co-chairman.

But Arts Carolina's loss doesn't spell the end of arts on campus.

Fine arts department heads agree that the administration is, in fact, very supportive of the arts and that Arts Carolina is just a casualty of a disastrous economy.

Renovations of Old Playmakers Theatre, Memorial Hall and Hyde Hall, as well as ambitious plans for a new Arts Common, remind faculty members of Chancellor James Moeser's love for the arts.

"This decision is, in fact, a direct antithesis to (the administration's) support of the arts," said Ray Dooley, professor of dramatic art. "Amy was an inspiration, and her loss is great, but there have been attempts to carry forward at least some of her work."

Brannock, however, said the elimination of Arts Carolina is just the start of problems for the arts community.

"I don't know what will happen, (and) I don't know how much this will affect the arts. It is hard to tell," Brannock said.

"I know this is because of a bad budget, but it also shows that support for the arts isn't what it could or needs to be."

Contact the A&E Editor at artsdesk@unc.edu.

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