

Rock, Pop and Other Nice Music

NIGEL FINN PICKS HALF-A-DOZEN SPECIAL RELEASES – SOME NEW; SOME HISTORIC



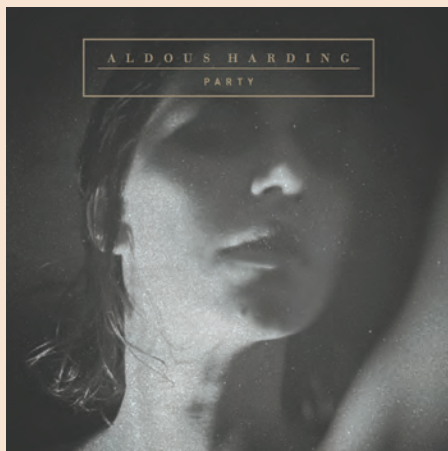
LAURA VIERS
The Lookout

Bella Union Bella 774 cd

It's not that Laura Viers has ever made a difficult album, more that *The Lookout* is the most mature and instantly accessible album she and husband/producer Tucker Martine have yet made, and it may well be the best as well. Her voice has grown, so it's stronger and more assured; her words have always read like poetry and this time they're more rounded less angular. I've been waiting for Laura Viers to have a really big album for years and *The Lookout* may well be her most successful.

Laura Viers has always been a highly original artist, hard to pigeon hole with a voice that's unique, and a way with a guitar and song structure that's entirely her own. This is still the case but the title track could almost be a single and deserves some radio play. There is a more commercial edge to a lot of the songs: they're still sophisticated but simpler, and show just how creative a studio can be in the right hands. That ability to build and craft; the chance to create your own vocal harmonies; the treatment and layering of instruments; builds songs that can be enjoyed as soundscapes that you can step into.

Very unusually someone else's song appears, such as a version of the Grateful Dead's *Mountains of the Moon*, ethereal and quietly beautiful. This is a properly beautiful album with a lot to explore. Go get yourself a copy!



ALDOUS HARDING
Party

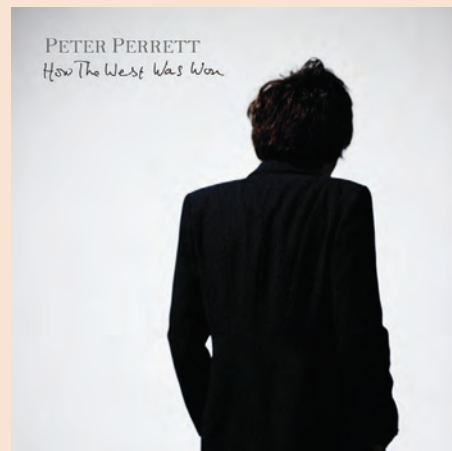
4AD, 4AD008CD

Aldous Harding grew up in New Zealand and this is her second album. *Party* was recorded in Bristol with long time PJ Harvey collaborator John Parish contributing and producing. That you can hear and (casting around for a place to anchor Aldous Harding's voice) fans of Polly Harvey will enjoy this.

That's only a jumping off place really, as Aldous Harding has one of the most hypnotic and mesmerising voices I've heard in years. Dark, deep and almost childlike by turns, her voice has complexity and depth, almost to the point where the voice rather than the words become the point of focus.

The music frames the voice; there's no lyric sheet and it's not really needed. And if you can tear yourself away from the voice, the words have a crystalline clarity. Pianos are soft, subdued, drums minimal and used as accents or colours. Everything serves her extraordinary voice, the simple saxophone part at the end of *Imagining my Man*, the wash of electric guitar against the finger picked acoustic of *Living the Classics*.

The title track is as unnerving as it is compelling, with a genuine sense of almost unfathomable depth. Both strange and disquietingly beautiful, it grows with every listen. *I'm so Sorry* sits against a minimal acoustic guitar with her voice keening above it one moment, and twining around it the next. Aldous Harding's *Party* is one of the most darkly beautiful and sensuous albums I've heard.



PETER PERRETT
How The West Was Won

Domino WIGCD382

The Only Ones were a fine band, and *Another girl Another Planet* was a wonderful song. Coming across a new Peter Perrett album was therefore quite a thrill, and it doesn't disappoint in any way. Peter Perrett spent many years addicted to heroin and crack cocaine, but has been clean since 2011. *How the West Was Won* was released last year and is full of life and vigour.

It's a family affair. Peter's sons play bass and lead guitar, and despite the years of drug abuse and the ravages it wrought on his voice, his delivery is as great as always; likewise his songwriting. The pin-sharp words are mostly autobiographical. Despite the wasted years there isn't an ounce of self-pity, and Perrett's ability to write a really clever couplet is undiminished: *The jigsaw pieces next to me, are part of the assembly of a major work of art*. Musically it's very indie rock and has a real energy. The guitar is mixed loud and up front and this album that gets better the louder it's played.

The title track borrows the riff from Lou Reed's *Sweet Jane* and uses it to frame an acerbic love song to America. *Something in my Brain* unflinchingly references the years of drug abuse but has tenderness as well. The closing track: *Take Me Home* is written for his partner, and is, in the best possible way, very honest and vulnerable.

NIGEL FINN

**HOWLIN' WOLF****Moanin' In The Moonlight**

State of Art 81209

State Of Art have released a whole lot of 24-bit re-masters of blues and jazz albums, and this example appeared just when I wanted to dig back into the beginnings of electric blues. I have nothing to reference this re-master against, but it does sound incredibly raw, alive and seething with energy. (And on this basis, other State Of The Art releases are going be worth investigating too.)

Moanin' in the Moonlight was first released in 1959, but this reissue has a further 15 tracks recorded between 1951 and 1960, covering ten seminal years in the history of rock and blues, as well as the tracks from the original album. Guitarists Hubert Sumlin and Willie Johnson both ran amplifiers flat out, so here are some of the prototype overdriven guitar sounds that grew to be such a huge part of rock music. Add to that the fact that the recordings were live takes, and this sounds thrilling now; hearing these tracks in the 1950s must have been life changing.

The various people Howlin' Wolf worked with all swing like demons, recording levels are all over the place and the longest track is just 3 minutes and 4 seconds. I was prepared for this to be a curiosity but it sounds incredibly fresh, alive and timeless, in the way that really good music is.

**GOV'T MULE****Dark Side Of The Mule**

Provogue PRD 7446 5

Gov't Mule is a band that can turn itself to pretty much anything, in the case the title being the giveaway. *Dark Side of the Mule* is live album of Pink Floyd songs – think interpretations rather than a tribute act – recorded one Halloween shortly after the death of and dedicated to Rick Wright. It was also – of no benefit here – performed in surround sound and while this is stereo someone's made a very good job of the recording, it sounds great. The level of musicianship is right up there, Warren Haynes is a great guitarist and singer and he's obsessive about tone as well.

The album opens with *One of these Days* but it's when *Shine on You Crazy Diamond Pts 1-5* begins that things go from good to something obviously special. Gov't Mule's skill is in knowing what matters enough of the original to keep while adding enough of themselves. The result is a really spectacular version of what is already a spectacular song, and the Hammond organ sounds so big and warm and organic. Somewhere in true Mule fashion just the funkier edge is added to proceedings as well, giving an entirely new slant to *Have a Cigar*.

The set has been well picked. *Breath, Time and Money* (which gets really funky) are here, along with *Comfortably Numb*, the rest of *Shine on ...*, and a closing *Wish You Were Here*. What shines through is just how good these songs are. Although they're perhaps dulled by repetition over the years, hearing them again interpreted by the Mule has made me revisit and enjoy the originals again.

**THE MONKEES****I'm a Believer, The Best of....**

Music Club MCDLX074

Last issue I rather grudgingly found myself liking *Divide* – my daughter's first album purchase. One day tired of a constant diet of Ed, I dug this out, and now we play The Monkees more than anything else.

There are more than a few outrageously well played songs on here. I spoke to a friend who's big into the 1960s and Glen Campbell and Carol Kay were both mentioned as session players. What isn't in doubt, however, is that some of the guitar and bass parts are really spectacular, and the same can be said for the drums and organ as well. What I hadn't understood was just how well constructed a lot of these songs are. Furthermore, when these were hits I would have heard them on the TV; playing them on a hi-fi system is something of a revelation.

Yes, it's a very 1960s production, and the crude stereo mix is a distraction, but these are unquestionably great pop songs. Somebody wanted big hits, so here they're borrowing shamelessly from just about everyone, and stirring it all into a real kitchen sink of a mix. Played on a decent system, there's just so much to listen to; every track fascinates: horn sections here, string sections there, wonderfully trebly electric guitar and vocal harmonies everywhere; oh yes, and kettle drums as well! This turns out to be more fun than I've had in a long time.