

# In Tune

The Daily News

THURSDAY, JANUARY 20, 2011

## Redemptionists?

**After irritating some critics by departing from their signature sound on their past couple releases, the Decemberists return to their roots on their excellent sixth full-length 'The King Is Dead'**

**THE DECEMBERISTS, "The King Is Dead"** (Capitol) ★★☆☆ — Morbid and intelligent rockers the Decemberists went off their traditional path the past couple records, seemingly irritating critics, who wanted the band to stick with what got them their following. Not me. "Hazards of Love" is my favorite of their records by far, and it will go down as one of the least appreciated pieces of work in modern times.

For "The King Is Dead," their sixth, the band has returned to its roots, stripped back the opus ambition, and

delivered a straight-forward, storyline-free album of 10 cuts that are over in a tidy 40 minutes. Turns out they're still scary good at keeping things simple.

Joined on most of the cuts by Gillian Welch (who provides rich backing vocals) and with R.E.M. guitarist Peter Buck chiming in, the Colin Meloy-led band slips deep into folk waters, with some nice waves of true country here and there to add mood. "So raise a glass to the turnings of the seasons," Meloy sings on excellent opener "Don't Carry It All," (the album's creative state-

ment?) which leads the way for "Rox in the Box"; '90s college rock-style romper "This Is Why We Fight"; and tremendous first single "Down By the Water," already a Decemberists classic. Meanwhile, "January Hymn," "June Hymn" and closer "Dear Avery" will make those who like the simpler stuff swoon.

For those who trailed off when the Decemberists took fantastical adventures, get ready to feel right at home again. The band didn't need it, but this is redemption. (Brian Krasman)



**THE JAYHAWKS, "Hollywood Town Hall: Expanded Edition"** (American) ★★☆☆½; **"Tomorrow the Green Grass: Legacy Edition"** (American) ★★☆☆ — Thanks to the dynamic one-two punch of vocalists/guitarists Mark Olson and Gary Louris, the Jayhawks emerged as one of alternative country's pioneering bands in the early 1990s. That the Minneapolis-based outfit was doing their thing at the very height of the grunge craze probably prevented the Jayhawks from getting the mainstream fame they so richly deserved, but the guys left behind a musical legacy that

remains as rich and vibrant today as it was some two decades ago.

The fine folks at American Recordings have delivered phenomenally good expanded reissues of the Jayhawks' best two albums — 1992's "Hollywood Town Hall" and 1995's "Tomorrow the Green Grass" — that are essential additions to the collections of both the band's loyal cadre of fans and anyone who enjoys alternative country music in general.

"Hollywood Town Hall: Expanded Edition" includes remastered recordings of the original 10 tunes, which in itself would be worth the investment. Yet in addition to classic tunes such as "Waiting for the Sun," "Crowded in the Wings," "Take Me With You (When You Go)," "Wichita" and "Nevada, California," there are five previously unavailable and/or unreleased gems that include "Leave No Gold," "Keith and Quentin," "Up Above My Head," "Warm River" and "Mother Trust You to Walk to the Store."

Even better is the two-disc, 37-track "Tomorrow the Green Grass: Legacy Edition." The final album the band recorded with Olson, the 13 original tunes — highlighted by "Blue," "I'd Run Away," "Two Hearts," "Real Light," "Bad Time" and "See Him on the Street" — have never sounded better and the first disc includes previously unreleased gems in "Sweet Hobo Self," "Sleep While You Can" and "Blue From Now On (Take 1)." The second disc is a treasure trove for Jayhawks fans, with 18 previously unreleased "Mystery Demos." Among the "Mystery" keepers are "Won't Be Coming Home," "Precious Time," "Cotton Dress," "Over My Shoulder" and "Red's Song." Great stuff. (Jeffrey Sisk)

**BRAIDS, "Native Speaker"** (Kanine) ★☆☆ — Canadian indie pop foursome Braids kept me captivated for about two-thirds of their solid debut album "Native Speaker." But somewhere during "Lammicken," the fifth tune on the seven-track release, I found myself growing tired of the experimental ambient melodies and not even the ethereal lead vocals of Raphaëlle Standell-Preston could bring me back.

Up until that point, however, I was swept away by Braids on sprawling keepers like "Lemonade," "Plath Heart" and the title track. I think absorbing "Native Speaker" in smaller doses (rather than a single sitting) is the best way to appreciate this talented outfit without fear of boredom setting in. (JS)

**THE NECRONAUTS, "Gauche et Droite"** (High School Football/Black Cactus) ★☆☆ — It seems pretty clear to me that half-brothers Billy and Dale Goodman spent a lot of time listening to bands like Built to Spill, Dinosaur Jr., Pavement, Sonic Youth, the Pixies and Fugazi while growing up in the suburban confines of Mesa, Ariz. Since founding the Necronauts a decade



ago, the Goodmans have paid homage to those that influenced them through their own energetic brand of indie rock.

After a six-year wait, the Necronauts return in a big, big way with "Gauche et Droite," a sprawling two-disc, 40-track collection of tunes that represents the best work of their career. Rock solid — and occasionally spectacular — from beginning to end, it might be tough making it through "Gauche et Droite's" 104 minutes in a single sitting. Unless, of course, you're planning a long drive somewhere or are really, really bored one afternoon. Fortunately, no matter what size musical bites you take, I'm pretty sure you'll find the Necronauts quite tasty.

Disc 1 is (slightly) superior to Disc 2 with standout tracks such as "Land Survey (Put Another Bullet In the Chamber)," "Depredation Medication," "Firekid/Lovefriend," "Gravity Is Not Your Friend" and "On Fire." While not quite as consistent (and bogged down with "original versions" of a half dozen songs from the first platter), Disc 2 scores with the bluntly titled "S\*\*\*," "For the First and Last Time," "White Mouth" and "Too Fast for Johnny." Good stuff. (JS)

**MINKS, "By the Hedge"** (Captured Tracks) ★☆☆ — New York-based duo Minks have had their music described as "lo-fi goth-pop" and I can't really argue with that. Sean Kilfoyle and Amalie Bruun have fashioned a nice following on the underground pop scene and do nothing to sully their reputation on this impressive full-length. "By the Hedge" is an atmospheric platter that would make for an interesting soundtrack on a gray and rainy day.

The 12 songs here are mostly good, with "Kusmi," "Life at Dusk," "Bruises," "Boys Run Wild" and "Juniper" being the standouts. There are a couple clunkers sprinkled into the proceedings — notably "Out of Tune," "Funeral Song" and "Ophelia" — but on balance this is a solid, if not spectacular effort. (JS)

**ETHAN GOLD, "Songs From a Toxic Apartment"** (self-released) ★☆☆½ — Ethan Gold's backstory is nothing short of fascinating. A Harvard graduate with a degree in social theory, Gold took a left turn toward the creative as musician. While earning a living scoring films and writing songs — not to mention producing and arranging pal Elvis Perkins' remarkable "Ash Wednesday" debut — Gold started composing a rock opera that soon ballooned to an unwieldy 75 songs. He's culled a dozen of those tunes for "Songs From a Toxic Apartment," an intriguing album whose title is quite literal. While composing his magnum opus, he lived in a flat that eventually was condemned because of asbestos and health-sapping toxic mold.

The self-released platter is a nice showcase for Gold, a talented writer/performer/multi-instrumentalist/producer/arranger. Highlights include "Why Don't You Sleep?," "They Turned Away," "Poison," "Tonight," "I.C.U. (toxic)" and "To Isis Sleeping." Reducing 75 songs to 12 leaves "Songs" a little disjointed, but there are some flashes of real brilliance to be found. (JS)

**THE BEETS, "Stay Home"** (Captured Tracks) ★☆☆ — If you're a fan of rough-around-the-edges garage rock, then Queens-based outfit the Beets figure to be right up your alley. "Stay Home" is a 13-track collection of mostly excellent lo-fi tunes (delivered in a crisp, clean 28 minutes) that build on the foundation of their "Spit In the Face of People Who Don't Want to Be Cool"



debut. Among the keepers here are opener "Cold Lips," "Watching T.V.," "Let It Dim," "Your Name Is on My Bones" and "Flight 14." A few missteps ("Dead," "Knock on Wood") prevent "Stay Home" from being an essential addition to your collection, but it's still a record worth exploring. (JS)



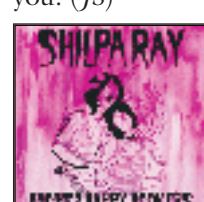
**THE MAINE, "In Darkness & In Light"** (Warner Bros.) ★☆☆½ — Emo rockers the Maine have cemented their status among genre heavyweights and "In Darkness & In Light" should appeal to their ever-growing fan base. This iTunes exclusive digital box set contains all sorts of goodies, including an eight-track album that features some B-sides, home recordings, acoustic tracks and the band's score for the short film of the same name. In addition, there are 150 photos, the titular film and a couple "making of" documentaries.

Among the songs, "Untangle Me," "Book of Me and You," "Growing Up" and "Washroom Color" are the standouts, but the Maine's loyal followers figure to gorge themselves on all the extras. (JS)



**JOHNSONS MOTORCAR, "Funky Disco Hardcore"** (Vivid Sound) ★☆☆½ — I wasn't sure what to expect when I gave this debut release from Johnsons Motorcar a spin. After all, it's a Celtic fusion five-piece based in Tokyo of all places, not exactly a hotbed for that style of music. Well, I'm

happy to report that "Funky Disco Hardcore" is a boatload of fun in the vein of albums by Flogging Molly, the Real McKenzies and Dropkick Murphys. The six-track EP is a high-energy collection of tunes that showcase frontman (and Florida native Martin Johnson) and his international assortment of bandmates. "Rocky Road to Dublin" launches the set in fine fashion and Johnsons Motorcar additionally hit the mark with "27 Years," "The Masons Apron/The Musical Priest" and "The Star of the County Down." Top o' the morning to you. (JS)



**SHILPA RAY AND HER HAPPY HOOKERS, "Teenage and Torture"** (Knitting Factory) ★☆☆ — If you take one listen to Shilpa Ray and walk away unsure of how the woman feels when she belts out her bluesy, raspy, bruised diatribes, might I suggest you stop listening to music, because you

obviously don't get it. Ray's second album with Her Happy Hookers is a gut-wrenching affair so powerful, it makes me even angrier we give an "American Idol" title to someone who can't hold a birthday candle to her.

Ray — who sort of is a cross between Johnette Napolitano and Janis Joplin — leaves her heart pumping and exposed, pouring every bit of herself into these songs that cover blues, psychedelia, garage rock and even some punk, and when it's all over, you feel certain no scar went untraced. The band opens with the suggestive "Hookers" before delving into "Venus Shower" (where Ray's harmonium comes alive); the thick, punchy "Liquidation Sale," on which she folds in lyrics to "Backdoor Man" and some fiery, pointed barbs; and slow-burning, scorned epic "Genie's Drugs," a song that brings heartbreak and anger together perfectly. Ray may take time to become a household name, but she'll be making music far longer (and far better) than these synthetic, false, obviously pre-programmed TV stars in a competition as real as unicorns. (BK)



**GHOST, "Opus Eponymous"** (Rise Above/Metal Blade) ★☆☆½ — Mysterious Swedish doom rockers Ghost are classic rock radio stars in waiting as they refine and polish the spookiness of Mercyful Fate/King Diamond from three decades ago and mix it with Blue Oyster Cult-style

timeless approachability. And here's the kicker about this incredibly infectious, sure-to-be-a-hit platter: It's Satanic as hell!

If you pay close attention you'll realize that in no time, but you might not mind because this record's so catchy. "Ritual," a song that's been converting followers since its Internet debut, could be played on any rock station and be an instant staple. Don't worry how gross the chorus is, you're singing along here! Same can be said for "Death Knell," the hookiest song that ever contained the dreaded "6-6-6"; incredibly mesmerizing "Elizabeth" (especially how the unnamed, hooded frontman pronounces the name); and "Genesis," a whirring, mind-warping closer that would make Pink Floyd jealous. Hands down the most accessible, melodic music ever to pay homage to the devil, "Opus Eponymous" will have you darting for the confessional. (BK)



**ELECTRIC WIZARD, "Black Masses"** (Rise Above/Metal Blade) ★☆☆½ — Long-standing English doom metal band Electric Wizard obviously know what their following likes, and they serve it up aplenty on their seventh opus "Black Masses." The Jus Osborn-led quartet are as evil and

druggy as ever, and if there's any real complaint to be registered, it's that the record sounds fairly close to what they've produced the last few years. No surprises, really.

And that's OK, because not every band feels a need to change things up. "Black Masses" is rock solid from its catchy opening cut "Black Mass" through stoner-friendly "Night Child" and into the areas where they do take a few chances, such as fizzy and mesmerizing "Satyr IX" and drone-laden "Scorpio Curse." If you dug their 2007 disc "Witchcult Today" more than their seminal "Dopethrone," you're going to be awfully fired up. (BK)

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