

Arts & Entertainment

'The Balancing Act' walks tightrope

The Balancing Act, "Three Squares and a Roof," IRS Records.

Maturity sometimes wins over the fiery-eyed angst of adolescence. You know those musicians. Cringe and howl on stage. Power of the spoken word to change the world.

But maturity, nothing more than simple understanding, is when you sit on the porch on a late-autumn Saturday evening, cozy with your acoustic guitar, cheering on the whirlwind youth in their pursuit of anarchic reform.

He stayed at home last night, to do some soul searching/We hope he found one/Nothing's ever certain/it's not easy being human but it's hard to be cement/so he's just another genius who can't pay the rent

"The Ballad of Art Snyder"

The Balancing Act, with shades of Simon and Garfunkel and the Grateful Dead, don't harp on and on about social reform. On this album they seem to care more for writing well-metered prose and merge the words with progressive instrumentals — reacting to the words only as a matter of conversation.

The four in the group — Jeff Davis, Robert Blackmon, Willie Aron and Steve Wagner — seem to grasp the tightrope act of a road musician's life. Nights spent on a bunk bed in the back room of some corroded tavern, barkeeps trying to pay you with cocaine; nights to frame on the wall and nights destined for that Siberian archipelago of dead memory.

But then to settle down, knowledge of the world and the road calloused in your eyes, and harmonize about the road gone by and the road ahead. A circular kind of thing.

"Red Umbrella" sports tight, resonant harmony that you get from

wandering the New York subway tunnels when you don't have enough money to ride the train, singing for all you're worth and rolling steady to the bridge.

The album moves along at a steady pace; some songs, like "Whiskered Wife," are a little too slow, a bog in the overall works, though most carry their tempo with aural aesthetic quality.

—Kevin Cowan

The Flaming Lips, "Aw, God! It's The Flaming Lips," Restless Records.

Used to be that bands who made "drug music" did so pretty obviously and unself-consciously. Song length conveniently matched the ebbs and zeniths of your average hallucinogenic excursion into the Vedanta, usually vacillating between slithering, coiling trance music and sonic explosions that popped those little lysergic soap bubbles your cerebral cortex was blowing frantically. Lyrics skirted the outskirts of coherence, occasionally frolicking nimbly into the glib meadows of absurdist jokes: Your head was melting, a giant day-glo crab was opening your box of Freakies cereal in search of the prize, and your skin felt like shag carpet.

The album covers usually didn't brag "drug music," but instead graphically simulated the hallucinogenic experience with amorphous organic shapes that, if you'd never been on a blotter binge, would probably make you avoid the album because someone had done his fecal duty on it.

The Flaming Lips' second album, "Aw God! It's . . ." is classic acid rock, a virtual festival of drug-soaked influences from the Hieronymous-

Bosch-meets-Jackson-Pollock-in-the-blacklight-room-at-Spencer's-Gifts LP cover, to the lava-lamp volcanic eruptions that splatter from your speakers and evaporate slowly on the walls.

In case you might be doubting the necessity of an acid-rock resurgence in the high-tech, pasta-to-go, deco 1980s, the Lips respond with punk declamation in "Everything's Exploding":

"When I look in the mirror/and my brains are falling/out of my head./ Well, there's nothing wrong it's just the way I feel/if you don't like it/write your own song..." This witch's brew of punk, Butthole Surfers revisionist new wave and retrometal comes on so self-assured that it's hard to write it off as a part of alternative music's search for vicarious, and for the most part, vestigial nostalgia. This Lips may have borrowed lustfully from a '60s musical genre, but their power is undeniable. They careen through this genre like the Replacements careened through the grunge-blues of the Stones' "Exile on Main Street" on "Let it Be" and especially "Tim," until the influences become mere trace elements.

"Aw God! It's . . ." is a thundering series of aural waves, ebbing sporadically just so the listener realizes just how monstrous the power chords are when they come roaring back into the mix.

Great vinyl and highly, highly recommended. Probably real effective on acid, too.

—Charles Lieurance

Fields of Nephilim, "Dawnrazor," Beggar's Banquet.

The Fields of Nephilim is one of England's fastest-growing cult bands. They imported a cowboy



image from American western movies, and their first American release, "Dawnrazor," is a combination of dark, moody, English pop-angst music and these Hollywood western themes.

One of the interesting things about this album is that the band has created a musical niche of its own and runs around terrorizing it like a group of small-town villains. The band members are self-proclaimed bad guys, and try to appear and sound as evil as they can.

With songs like "Dust," "Power" and "Preacher Man" (now a video on MTV), they utilize train whistles, far-off harmonicas and the desert wind to distinguish themselves from just any English art band.

The fact is that half the charm of this album is the synthesis of English modern pop music with American western music and themes. It is a

unique sound. Other bands have worked the wild west into their music, such as Wall of Voodoo and Gun Club, but not from the point of view of the Fields of Nephilim. The overall effect achieved by the band is music created by cowboys with fancy haircuts wearing a little bit of mascara.

Actually, most of the songs on the album are quite danceable. The vocalist has a remarkable voice, rich and resonant, capable of directing the power of the music. The bass and guitars drive each song relentlessly. The drums punctuate the mood.

The only problematic song on the album is "The Sequel," which ends with unconvincing shrieks from a woman followed by a chain saw. Other than that it is a fairly inoffen-

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