

MUSIC REVIEWS



Sugar
"Besides"
Rykodisc
Grade: A

For Sugar fans, "Besides" may be the band's swan song. Lead singer/guitarist Bob Mould has suffered an ongoing hearing problem from years of touring. Mould has said that it was becoming difficult for him to tune accurately, and that he was considering other avenues, such as acoustic work.

Sugar fans needn't mourn. "Besides" is not a slopped-together package of songs that didn't make the last two albums, "Copper Blue" and "File Under Easy Listening."

The best part of Sugar is how each of the songs immediately catches your ear. The first song, "Needle Hits E" is a great example of Mould's talents. He has a gift for integrating corrosive guitars and great harmonies into songs that usually last about three minutes.

The lyrics on "Besides" are more optimistic than Sugar's last two releases.

Still, Mould's lyrics can be as dark as anything in Nine Inch Nails' arsenal.

Bassist David Barbe and drummer Malcolm Travis have always proved they're more than just Mould's support crew. Travis' drumming is tight and crisp throughout "Besides." Though Barbe may not have a stunning bass solo on the album, each note he plays perfectly complements Mould and Travis.

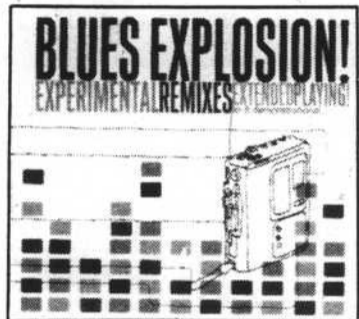
Fans of Mould's last great group, Hüsker Dü, will enjoy "Where Dia-

monds are Halos." And Sugar fans should dig new versions of "If I Can't Change Your Mind" and "The Slim."

"Besides" clocks in at under 70 minutes — almost 30 minutes more than "Copper Blue," but none of the songs drag.

If you're really craving a Sugar overdose, try to hunt down the limited edition of this release. The first 27,000 copies contain a live compact disc of Sugar playing First Avenue in Minneapolis.

—Sean McCarthy



The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion
"Experimental Remixes"
Matador Records
Grade: C+

This collection of remixed tunes by The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, courtesy of some of rap's and techno's brightest stars, reveals why alternate mixes can bring out the best and the worst in songs.

With the talents of musicians such as Mike Diamond and Mario Caldato, Jr. of the Beastie Boys, Beck, GZA

from the Wu-Tang Clan and Moby, the Blues Explosion's already raw and driving sounds are twisted into completely different creations.

The alternate versions of these songs vary from disorderly remixes and edits, as is done by U.N.K.L.E. on "Bellbottoms," to complete reworkings, as revealed in "Greyhound Part 2," in which GZA has added a previously nonexistent rap by Killah Priest.

Although reworking songs with musicians from different genres is

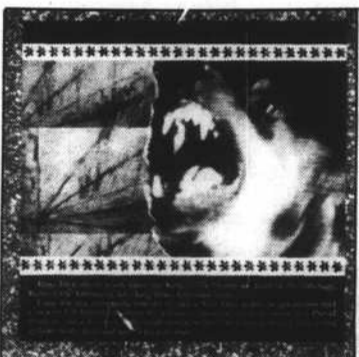
something that has been done and done well before (i.e. Trent Reznor's remix of Megadeth's "Symphony of Destruction"), putting rap and techno artists in the same studio with "Bellbottoms," "Flavor" and "Soul Typecast" may have threatened the quality of the songs.

In many cases, that is exactly what happened. But after listening to the Beastie Boys and Beck tear into and tear up "Flavor" in "Flavor Part 1" and "Flavor Part 2," it is somewhat hard to argue with the idea.

The Blues Explosion is, after all, one of rock music's most piecemeal bands, throwing elements of punk rock, rhythm and blues, soul and rap into the same bag and pulling out songs that actually sound like a solid entity.

Adding a little here and taking a little there may hurt the overall effect of some of these patchwork creations. But at the same time, doing so only furthers the fantastic concepts Spencer and company started three years and three albums ago.

—Jeff Randall



mousetrap
"the dead air sound system"
Grass Records
Grade: B

On its third full-length release, Omaha's mousetrap serves up more of the dark, soul-inspired rock that made its previous albums so equally appealing and unsettling.

Listening to guitarist and vocalist Patrick Buchanan screech full-bore over the tawdry details of relationships gone horribly wrong occasionally feels

less like a song than an excerpt from a psychiatrist's session with a sociopath. But when backed by the rock-solid rhythm section, consisting of bassist/vocalist Craig Crawford and drummer Duncan Black, Buchanan's rants sound hauntingly poetic, in a twisted sort of way.

The opening track, "Signal to Noise," is a tale of lust for "a dextrine vision of love at the end of the bar" to whom he promises "one night only" and "no exit." The desperate vocals here are matched only by the ever-

present throb of the music.

"Angels of the Interstate," one of the album's best tracks, follows with the words of a tormented soul whose only contact with his mate is through the U.S. Postal Service.

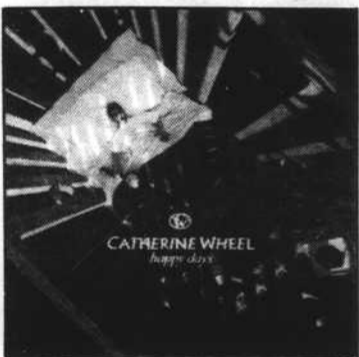
But the album's best track comes later with "Sweet Dreams Baby," a song that pounds itself into the listener with unrelenting force from beginning to end, with Black's monstrously powerful drumming style as the centerpiece.

The most distinguishable difference

between this album and the band's previous efforts is an overall sound that better reproduces the raw desperation of mousetrap's live shows.

"the dead air sound system" is an album not to be overlooked by the choosy music enthusiast. It may not always be pretty, and it may not always be comfortable, but imagine how boring the world would be if everything was that perfect.

—Jeff Randall



Catherine Wheel
"Happy Days"
Mercury Records
Grade: B-

Besides having one of the most ironic album titles in recent memory, Catherine Wheel's "Happy Days" is an exercise in both loathing and beautiful music.

Whether this loathing is directed inward or outward, guitarist/vocalist Rob Dickinson expresses it with an

utterly charming attitude that runs alongside the airy guitars that have defined Catherine Wheel's sound.

Catherine Wheel has never been a cheery band, but now the somewhat passive sorrow of its previous albums has been replaced with raw desperation and rage, accompanied by the occasional distortion guitar burst or scream. This new edge provides a sense of anticipation that had been lacking on both "Chrome" and "Ferment" and makes for a better album both lyrically and musically.

On "Waydown," the album's first single, Dickinson's voice alternates between sadistic laughs, whispers and screams that pull the listener into the song and refuse to let go until he is finished.

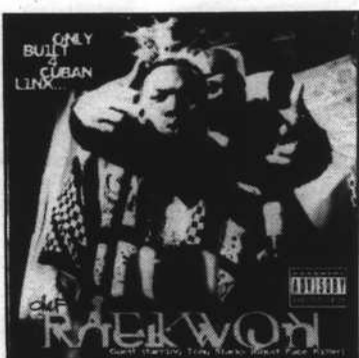
"Judy Staring at the Sun" features guest vocals by Belly's Tanya Donnelly, whose light vocals add an element of hope to an otherwise hopeless tale and serve as a beautiful counter to Dickinson's somber vocal tone.

One of the album's most beautiful songs has one of its most blunt titles.

"Eat My Dust You Insensitive Fuck" is a melodic and echo-filled tune that could easily be compared to Catherine Wheel's earlier sound.

Through it all, "Happy Days" manages to maintain the subtle beauty that has made Catherine Wheel a welcome alternative to the grunge and punk revolutions that have dominated rock in recent years, and it is well worth a listen.

—Jeff Randall



Raekwon
"Only Built 4 Cuban Linx..."
RCA
Grade: A-

The Wu-Tang Clan has been making a ruckus ever since its first single in the summer of 1993. On Raekwon's solo album, "Only Built 4 Cuban Linx...", the Wu shows for the fourth time why it's at the top of the game.

Not only has the Wu-Tang spawned a classic album, but each of the members are in turn advancing powerful solo careers.

Method Man was the first to drop a solo and just released a remix of his third single. Ol' Dirty Bastard has dropped two singles from his album, too. Unfortunately, ODB is the main Wu figure missing from Raekwon's album.

"Linx" fronts Raekwon the Chef and features Ghost Face Killer on most tracks. The two make a terrific team with complementing vocal styles.

That accounts for half of the Wu's success. The variety of MCs, all with skills, make this a versatile and dangerous group.

On the production side, the Rza is on point and proves to be one of the hottest producers this side of DJ Premier.

"Glaciers of Ice" is the first single. It has multi-layered sounds complementing Rae, Ghost and Master Killa. Rae starts the flow so smooth you don't even know it's started.

The fat second single, "Ice Cream" co-stars Method Man over a scant track.

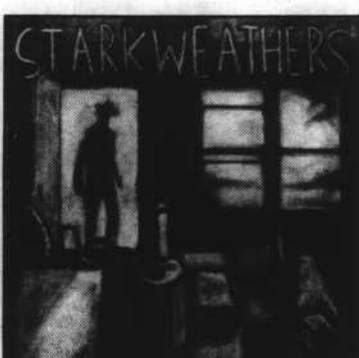
Some of the best cuts are posse jams like "Guillotine," with the Genius and Inspectah Deck, and "Wu-Gambinos"

starring Rae, Ghost, Master Killa and Meth. Even the Rza himself steps out from behind the boards to take a turn on the mic.

Other simple but effective tracks back the songs "Knuckleheadz" and "Knowledge God," and a beautiful Black Ivory sample comes to light in "Criminology."

Every track on "Linx" is top notch. Not even the skits are annoying. With success like this, the Wu-Tang Clan continues to dominate hip-hop.

—Greg Schick



The Starkweathers
"The Starkweathers - 5-Song EP"
Faye Records
Grade: B+

Celebrate Starkweather! Nebraskans owe a debt of gratitude to Lincoln's favorite son. The guy single-handedly put this town on the map — with just a little help from his girlfriend.

For a few brief days in January 1958 — and again at the time of his execution in June of '59 — the eyes of the nation turned to the heartland in way

they never had before.

Since then, there's been a TV miniseries, an album by the Boss and, as if that weren't enough, a country-fried, alternative rockabilly/bluegrass band from Kansas City — the Starkweathers.

With songs like "Burn the Flag" and "Greektown in Flames," the Starkweathers may be just a little too combustible for mainstream country stations. The band certainly retains the more primitive elements of redneckedness that made this part of the country great, the put-up-or-shut-up grit and grin.

What they lack, thankfully, is the my-country-right-or-wrong patina that has grown, like some deadly fungus, over a once vital musical idiom.

The Starkweathers know their roots in social revolution and protest. More importantly, they know where their future lies — in the rough and tumble of human troubles. Country music as camptown revival. Bluegrass meets rhythm and blues.

If this all sounds a little overblown, well, it may be. The Starkweathers have a ways to go, and they may not be up to the hike. It's a rocky road ahead

for the band and its music.

But it has something going for it: help from the folks at its new label, Sub Pop. If anyone can help The Starkweathers find its own rough edges, that label will.

And, as to whether the band's live show cuts the mustard, well ...

Lincoln will have a chance to welcome the spirit of Starkweather back into its bosom when his namesake plays at Knickerbockers Aug. 25.

—Mark Baldrige

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