

Music

Smog
"Knock Knock"
Drag City Records
Grade: A

Smog is one man's pollution, the solo work of a smoky and dirtied songwriter named Bill Callahan.

His latest record of Chris Isaak-meets-Leonard Cohen tunes is trademark-similar to his past efforts: Most of which have sounded as if they could be soundtracks to Wim Wenders' 1984 film, "Paris, Texas" – sad, lonely and quietly bitter.

Callahan's creaky, low-key and heartfelt songs cut like the devil's butter knife.

On cue with its moody and depressing feel, "Knock Knock" is another example of how he has the rare talent to smoothly emote songs that



sound like tear-filled laser beams born from rough travel.

The songwriter employs a variety of instruments to create thick, somber atmospheres. Some songs use cello, piano, acoustic guitar and percussion to pin down a dark vibe, but then Callahan does a 360-degree turn on the a capella tune "Left Only With Love."

The core devices of Callahan's expressive weaponry is an acoustic guitar and his tender baritone voice, which croons to poetry that is predominantly personal.

Whether it be words or guitar strumming, the majority of Callahan's new work has a dominating element.

His songs either dance to a twisty beat or they lyrically brood.

One in particular does both. "Cold-blooded Old Times" best exemplifies an upbeat exploitation of Callahan's disabled soul.

The song tempts a good booty shaking with its classic, mid-tempo snare slap that accents the equally bouncy guitar playing.

Lyrically, it's about what you'd expect.

"Cold blooded old times ... the types of memories that turn your bones to glass ... turn your bones to glass," Callahan sings.

Frank Zappa's purist disciples of the emotionally funny and phony school of music should relax: Callahan sings like an honest and weary man, not a spoiled college bloke who can't handle being dealt a losing hand here and there.

He sings about loss with class, dignity and restraint in a manner that once made country music great.

Like George Jones and Johnny Cash,

Callahan documents his most haunted moods, because they are his most powerful.

Although the singing grade-school girls on the eighth track, "Hit the Ground Running," shows that Smog can produce some light moments, most of "Knock Knock" is tough.

"Left Only With Love" is the last track and the hardest pill to swallow.

The words and the lonely timbre of Callahan's a capella voice kills room conversation like the visual passing of a ghost.

"I'm left only with love for you ... You did what was right to do ... And I hope you find your husband ... And a father for your children," he sings.

In retrospect, these lyrics are especially powerful because of their relationship to the last two lines of the album's first song, "Let's Move to the Country."

Again Callahan sounds as if he is singing to his love, the mother of his future children, long after he had lost her. If he's half the cowboy he makes himself out to be, it was probably because of his wandering and regretful ways.

"Let's start a ...
 Let's have a ..."

- Christopher Heine

Dropkick Murphys
"The Gang's All Here"
Hellcat Records
Grade: B-

With a band like the Dropkick Murphys, work ethics are pretty important.

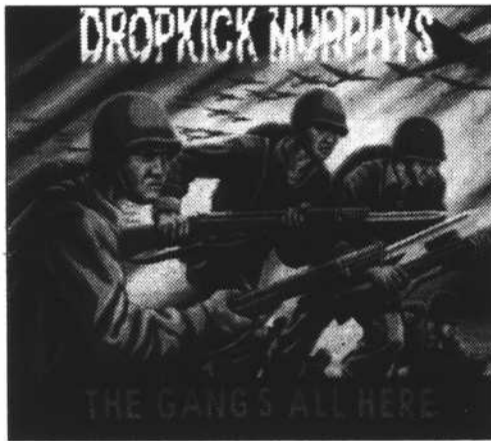
The Boston oi-punk quartet has built its name on a credibility they take very seriously. They're a group whose very nature is synonymous with DIY persistence both in its music and their day-to-day lives.

That's why it wasn't surprising when singer Mike McColgan quit the band to join the Boston Fire Department last year. Oi oi.

However, being down and out is something these Irish laddies thrive on, and within months of McColgan's departure the group had enlisted the vocals of longtime friend Al Barr.

Immediately thereafter, they joined the Vans Warped Tour and then embarked on a full U.S. and European tour with the anti-racist Unity Festival, and somehow still found time to work on their latest release "The Gang's All Here."

Sounds impressive, but when it comes to DKM it's really nothing new. After all, this is a band who put out six 7" and one CD EP in their first year alone. However, despite the valiant efforts of those involved, "The Gang's All Here" just doesn't live up to "Do or Die," the group's 1998 full-length release on Hellcat Records.



The most glaring and deteriorating change is the difference between McColgan and Barr's vocal styles. McColgan employed a somewhat toneless yet smooth and powerful bellow that hits the gut like a pint of Guinness, while Barr relies heavily on an over-the-top gritty yell, more like corn beef and cabbage – not bad, but not as good as Guinness.

Still, about half of "The Gang's All Here" is very good and stays true to what has worked for the group – a fast and furious mixture of three-chord punk, working class cadences and Irish folk influences. "Curse of A Fallen Soul" is one such example. What begins with slow and sparse piano chords and sad barroom group singing ends up an instant punk anthem, complete with a section of just claps and a sing-along chorus.

Other songs, such as "Devil's Brigade" and "Homeward Bound," incorporate similar elements and are just as infectious as some of DKM's earlier work.

However, "The Gang's All Here" has no tracks that even compare to "Barroom Hero," "Noble" or "Boys on the Docks" – all off of "Do or Die," and is not likely to receive the same acclaim garnered by "Do or Die."

But knowing the Dropkick Murphys, they'll probably release something new in a few weeks anyway.

- Jason Hardy

Frank Black and the Catholics
"Pistolero"
spinART Records
Grade: C+

Frank Black's new album, "Pistolero," has a song on it that will turn even the most eloquent of fans into blubbing fools who utter Wayne and Garthisms such as "This rocks!" or "We're not worthy, Mr. Black."

The song "I Switched You" is nearly six minutes of menacing rock riffs and arrogant swagger and will prompt any patriotic rock fan to turn the stereo up. But that's about it. The rest of the album is full of mid-tempo classic rock rehashes, none of which are bad, but all of which are interchangeable. Black seems bored and tired, as though he's just run a marathon, and someone made him record an album after he crossed the finish line.

Boring and tired is something Black has never been before. As the vocalist/guitarist and primary songwriter for the legendary Boston band, the Pixies, Black and bassist Kim Deal designed the template for alternative rock that bands such as Nirvana followed. The band's mix of punk rock, manic surf guitar and pop melodies spawned countless, and usually lesser, progeny. Black continued the momentum with

two great solo albums, expanding the Pixies' palette with a variety of musical genres.

However, Black's third album, "The Cult of Ray," while fun, was a pretty inessential collection of straight-forward hard rock tunes. The



album failed to move units, and the number-crunchers at his record label dropped him. A long legal battle with the record company followed, and he couldn't find a new home for him and his back-up band, the Catholics. It appeared that Black had become another casualty in the profits vs. art war.

Finding a new home at tiny indie label spinART, Black surprised many with his self-titled fourth album. Recorded live to two-track, the album was a raw, real rock 'n' roll document. The songs were well-written and Black seemed rejuvenated.

Enter "Pistolero." Black is back to treading water. The album, released a mere seven months after the last one, would have been served better if Black and his Catholics had spent more time in the songwriting process. "Pistolero" was also recorded live to two-track, and while the raw rock sound is still there, the similar production makes the lesser songs of "Pistolero" sound like outtakes from the last album.

His old sound is almost entirely gone. It's only present on "Billy Radcliffe," a rewrite of the Pixies' "Alec Eiffel" with the urgency siphoned out, and "I Think I'm Starting to Lose It," in which Black lets out a choked scream reminiscent of the early days. Instead, he relies on lyrics with easy rhymes (odd coming from the author of "Broken Face" and "Thalassocracy") and increasingly conservative arrangements. Black now plays slightly quirky roots rock, like he's John Mellencamp's mildly eccentric uncle.

But don't count Black out yet. The few good songs on this album show he can still do it when he wants to, and he's left a considerable body of work, both with the Pixies and solo, that are rock classics. Even Neil Young and Bob Dylan spent most of the 1980s releasing middling albums before regaining their muses in the '90s. Black should listen to his back catalog and try a little harder next time.

- Josh Krauter

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