

New Releases



Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers
"Echo"
WEA Records
Grade: C

Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers could learn something from the career of someone such as Madonna.

The Material Girl's recent, more sophisticated albums have somehow made her entire discography seem like an isle of fresh fruit.

Her playful exploration of pop music exemplifies that she has long understood how to personify evolution and variety.

In contrast, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers' new record "Echo" proves their inability to improve on their early, raw classics.

The 14-song release offers nothing as refreshing and startling as "Breakdown" or "American Girl" did in

1977. Those songs have become like canned goods — not exactly fresh anymore, but nonetheless a healthy, available supplement of awesome, old-fashioned rock 'n' roll.

The Heartbreakers' new album won't make any additions to their venerable collection of classics.

"Echo" at times is solid, but has only three songs worth a slot on a compilation tape that would be made only on your most mundane of days.

"Room at the Top" opens the record and patiently builds into a steady-paced and enjoyable rock ballad.

The love-song lyrics suggest a melancholy and stubborn fantasy based on ignoring reasonable decisions for that of the romantic and ideal.

"I got a room on the top of the world and I ain't coming down," Petty sings.

"Free Girl Now" bashes out its guitar, bass, drums and vocals in a well-used rock 'n' roll half-beat fashion. The song pumps some much needed party-like atmosphere into this often drab album.

The title track to "Echo" is a soft, acoustic guitar-driven ballad that appropriately represents the entire record in mood and quality; the song has its touching moments, but fails to deeply intrigue for its entirety.

The rest of the album is forgettable, a lesser feat than Petty's solo works such as the eloquent "Wildflowers" or even the marginally fervent "Full Moon Fever."



COURTESY PHOTO

QUINTESSENTIAL AMERICAN ROCKER Tom Petty still leans heavy on his roots, which may be dug too deep. His newest album, aptly named "Echo," indeed sounds like you've heard it before.

Furthermore, "Echo" is evidence that only a few songwriters can musically evolve and create an interesting long-term career.

Petty loses this one to his own tedious tendencies. Others have shown that such a wasteful fate need not be realized.

Madonna seems as though she has searched a mound of Casio keyboard cadavers to find new dance beats. Tom

Waits left the piano lounge for Neanderthal rhythm and soul.

The arty David Byrne tired of new wave and discovered world beat. Johnny Cash didn't have to find anything, he already had gospel and rockabilly in his back pocket.

Most importantly, each of these performers thrived with the variations in their discographies.

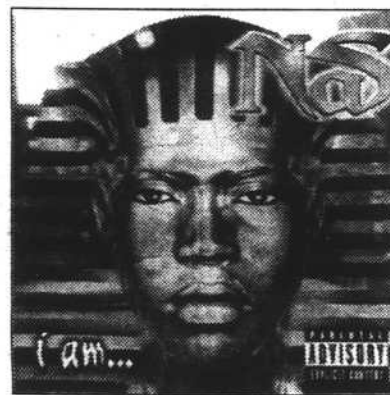
To his credit, Petty has scattered

numerous attempts on past records to meagerly infuse a little jazz and traditional blues into his rock 'n' roll.

However, he has only found a riveting voice in the straight-up American rock anthem.

Unfortunately, there are no great examples of that art form here. "Echo" only shows that Petty and his Heartbreakers have gone stale.

— Christopher Heine



Nas
"I Am ..."
Columbia Records
Grade: B-

Popular music in general and hip-hop in particular have always suffered from one great enemy in the battle for vitality and importance — repetition.

And in recent years, hip-hop has been filled to its brim with artists who exploit the innovations of their predecessors, turning once groundbreaking music into little more than a cliché.

But for Nasir Jones, the New York MC more commonly known as Nas, self-caricatures have thankfully been dropped in favor of stripped-down, intricately crafted street stories.

On "Illmatic" and "It Was Written," he bucked hip-hop's mainstream by relying — oddly enough — on imaginative wordplay and creative storytelling. The "ghetto fabulous" lifestyle being promoted by the likes of the Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur reared its head occasionally, only to be swatted down by Nas' lyrics, which depicted these ideas as shallow dreams or flashy facades.

But since the release of "It Was Written," Nas has unveiled Nas Escobar, a shady alter ego who preached about champagne, coke deals and phone taps as though they were the Holy Trinity.

"I Am ..." marks Nas' return to

solo work on a full-length album. And even though most of the pretensions and exaggerations of Nas' work with The Firm have been left behind on this album, some of it still remains.

The album's intro seems promising, as Nas and producer DJ Premier assemble a sound collage of tracks from the former's first two albums, and the first new track "N.Y. State of Mind Pt. II" fondly recalls the brilliance and fresh approach of Nas' earlier work.

The sheer bliss doesn't last as long as one might expect, however, as Nas begins falling into the testosterone-fueled boasting and misogynistic patterns of his contemporaries.

"Money is My Bitch" is — as one might infer from the title — a song that mixes greed and sexism into a difficult listen for those who favor Nas' more introspective past work. "Dr. Knockboot," "Big Things" and "Hate Me Now" are overindulgent stories of sex and fast cars, as though anyone listening really cares.

But even when Nas tries to be just like Puff Daddy and his ilk, he has a hard time pulling it off. In "Small World," the fast-and-high-and-rich lifestyle is questioned by Nas, who wonders how long it all can last.

On "I Want to Talk to You," Nas states his case with little run-around, as he says "I want to talk to the mayor or the governor/To the muthafuckin president/I want to talk to the FBI and CIA/And the muthafuckin congressmen/Can I talk to you?" with old-time conviction. And "Nas is Like" is an anthem-like flashback to the rapper's days as a small-time hustler.

While "I Am ..." can't compete with the albums of Nas' past, it's good to know that he still has the ability to decide what he should keep and what he should leave behind.

— Jeff Randall

Actor in first best-picture film dies

RANCHO MIRAGE, Calif. (AP) — Actor and bandleader Charles "Buddy" Rogers, star of the first film to win the best-picture Oscar and husband of screen legend Mary Pickford, died Wednesday. He was 94.

Rogers made his screen debut in 1926 with "Fascinating Youth." As the silent-movie era waned, Rogers starred in "Wings," which took Hollywood's top honor at the first Academy Awards ceremony in May 1929.

Rogers married Pickford in 1936, after her marriage to fellow superstar Douglas Fairbanks fell apart. She died in 1979.

Pickford ended her film career after only a handful of talking films, but Rogers remained active on screen through the '30s and early '40s.

He had roles in films such as "Young Eagles," and "Mexican Spitfire's Baby," which earned him the nickname "America's Boyfriend."



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