

Hillbilly Hellcats
"Our Brand"
Rockin' Cat Records
Grade: B

Hard drinkin' and hard livin' are the basis of the Hillbilly Hellcats' release, "Our Brand." The Colorado band charges through twenty rockabilly tunes in the tradition of Gene Vincent and Stray Cats-era Brian Setzer.

There is not doubt as to the quality of musicianship of the band. Chuck Hughes twangy Gretsch guitar gives a sound of authenticity to the album. Hughes splits the vocal duties with bass and banjo player, Lance Romance. The two are backed by Taz Bentley, the ex-drummer of Reverend Horton Heat who keeps the energetic tempo of the songs up.

The 20 songs of the album becomes excessive. After a while, the songs seem to blend into one another. The album could have definitely done with some editing. Too much of anything can get old after a while.

There can be some distinction made from the witty "Everybody Was Drinking Martinis But Me" to the somewhat crude "Roadkill Café." The band breaks the monotony with the song "Lazy Surfer" a romantic instrumental.

There is a promising career ahead for Hillbilly Hellcats. If this studio release is an indication of what this band can do live then this would be a band to catch. Until then, this album is more than enough to satisfy the most die-hard, slicked-backed, switchblade wielding rockabilly rebel.

—Patrick Kelly

Johnnie Bassett & the Blues Imperials
"Party My Blues Away"
Cannonball Records
Grade: B-

The Blues will never die, but they do need to be brought back to life. Johnnie Bassett takes a winning formula of polished blues music. He is backed by a polished sound consisting of a tight rhythm section and a swinging horn section.

The album is a collection of funky blues which seem like to much of a novelty, to be taken serious especially with songs like "Good Good Goodies" and the title track. Perhaps the best track of the album is the song "Wondering Blues." It is a sentimental ballad with brilliantly arranged piano and organ lines reminiscent of

Booker T. Jones work on the Stax label in the 1960s.

Bassett himself has a thick clean guitar tone reminiscent of the three Kings of the blues (Albert, B.B. and Freddie). His playing is thoughtful and well-placed, however it is a bit too stayed. His playing lacks the life and energy needed to keep this genre of music alive.

The lyrics of the song are keeping in the tradition of blues music. The songs deal with the themes of unrequited love and sexuality. The song, "Call Your Mama's Name" has the sultry attitude that would make Muddy Waters proud. Bassett may also have the distinction of being the first bluesman to make reference to Viagra, which opens the floodgates for future songwriters.

—Patrick Kelly

"Californication"
Red Hot Chili Peppers
Warner Bros. Records
Grade: C+

It can be debated that musical audiences have become less forgiving of a band in the '90s. We've seen sure-bet, multi-platinum artists like Pearl Jam, Smashing Pumpkins and U2 release one album in their collection that the public gave a cold shoulder to. The result? Their next release barely breaks the one million mark in sales. It can be an intimidating time for a band preparing for a comeback.

Enter the Red Hot Chili Peppers. After reaching super-stardom status with their 1992 release, "Blood Sugar Sex Magik," the band released "One Hot Minute" in 1996. Though that album featured some of the band's finest musicianship, it netted about a quarter of the sales of "Blood Sugar." Worries that the band was heading for washout status was confirmed when VH-1 featured them on their "Behind the Music" series.

Don't expect the band to be playing at the State Fair alongside Def Leppard or at the Royal Grove with Vanilla Ice just yet. It's summertime and the charts are crawling with party-heavy releases by Sugar Ray, Ricky Martin and Eminem. And when it comes to get down, party, ass moving grooves, the Chili Peppers can still kick out some potent jams to lure new fans into their funky domain.

That all said, the Chili Peppers new album, "Californication" breaks out with the furious, groove heavy "Around the World." Guitarist John Frusciante's return to the band is

immediately apparent. Frusciante left the band just as "Blood Sugar" was taking off on the charts. He was replaced by Jane's Addiction guitarist, Dave Navarro. Though Navarro provided a mystic, third-world style to the Peppers arsenal, it too often collided with Flea's distinct bass style of play.

Navarro did leave his mark on the band on "Californication." On the song, "Savior," the rhythm of the drums and guitar seem oddly akin to Jane's Addiction epic opus, "Three Days."

Scores of other funky, dirty ditties also decorate "Californication." "I Like Dirt," "Purple Stain" and "Get on Top" are all high energy and we've come to expect it from the Peppers. The strongest of the three, "Get on Top" could even make funk master George Clinton bob his head.

While these songs do give "Californication" a care free, party vibe, the band has also endured its share of pain. Recurring drug problems in the band, rumors of break-ups and the looming fear that the band has overstayed its welcome give yield to a good share of somber ballads. While none of these ballads attempt to duplicate their 1992 hit, "Under the Bridge," they show that the band is capable of writing something with more depth than "Suck my Kiss."

Musically, there's not much to gripe about on "Californication." Anthony Kiedis' vocals have never sounded more mature or sustained. And Flea shows why he is still one of the best bassists in rock.

But it never feels unified. For every intense funk-rock throb song like "Right on Time," you expect a sleepy, hushed ballad to follow. Only on "Otherside" do the two styles intersect. It is probably without coincidence that it is the best song on the CD.

Producer Rick Rubin has given everyone from Slayer to Tom Petty some of their best moments on tape. But he has yet to capture the energy the Peppers displayed on earlier works such as "Mother's Milk."

With "Californication," we get a sense that the band is renewed and energized. But far too many times, "Californication" seems like it could have used one or two definitive break out hits to make it a classic. Instead of being the CD to jump start your Friday or Saturday night this summer, "Californication" all too often feels like background music: A green bell pepper when you're expecting an atomic red hot one.

—Sean McCarthy

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