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known for but it also sounds a bit lonesome on this recording. His frail timbre winks about the mountains of melodies and reduces them to mole hills before rebuilding the landscape to introduce a new and improved American plane that just screams "Yankee Doodle Dandy" while galloping forth on "A Horse Named Bill."

The spoken word piece, "Arkansas Traveler," introduces a familiar conversation between two men who might have helped each other out even more than they would admit. Only Garcia could sound that cool in such a "hokey" situation. . . IT'S POETRY MAN!

2. THE SPINANES: MANOS

LABEL: SUB POP

Is there something missing here?

At first listen, you might not notice. But read the liner notes and you will find that drums and guitar are the only instruments on this album (aside from vocals).

There is an unbelievable amount of bass drum in the Spinanes mix. Overall, the album is good. The first thing you may notice about the band is that Rebecca Gates has a relatively familiar sounding voice. She can sound like The Breeders and other times like Julianna Hatfield, but there is an unbelievable amount of originality and persona in her voice.

On a musical note. . . The guitar is well-balanced throughout the recording with just enough low end and treble. I was able to detect one up, one toned down Sonic Youth rip-off lick. It's not hard to draw comparisons when listening to The Spinanes, but concentrate on the songs and the overall groove and it is evident that they are taking this one step further than folk or alternative music.

It would probably be intense to witness the Spinanes live. If you do,

drop me a line.

3. MEAT PUPPETS: TOO HIGH TO DIE

LABEL: POLYGRAM

Wow! The Meat Puppets now fit into the AOR radio format.

Yes, you can now hear the tune "Backwater" followed by any number of sloshy pop hits.

Unbelievable, but I still ask myself whether this is a good or bad phenomenon. It could mean that they have succumbed to the boring and meaningless capitalistic machine that many of "alternative" acts have avoided throughout the years.

But is this a logical assumption? You see, it's not the bands fault that they are becoming popular. They were a driving force in alternative music for 13 years! So how could things change? Did it take an endorsement from Kurt Cobain to grab AOR and MTV reps?

Who knows? All I can say is that it's a shame that it had to happen this way. It is embarrassing for people who were loyal to the band prior to the 1990s, and advantageous to the "band wagoners" in search of the next big alternative act.

"TOO HIGH TO DIE" is a great album. The band is playing better than ever and "TOO HIGH TO DIE" meets all the criteria of a traditional Meat Puppets album.

Kurt Kirkwood's vocals glide and weave throughout the chunky guitar riffs and chords like a hot knife through butter. The Kirkwood brothers can also craft some mighty fine songs.

Many of these tunes are reminiscent of early Meat Puppet albums. Perhaps the two most comparable songs are "Shine" and "Comin down," which could have easily been mistaken for, or released on, "Huevos" or "Meat Puppets II" because of that clean, guitar sounding, "I'm gonna ride this tractor to hell" type of groove. Check out the killer guitar lick

on the song "Station" and you will know why Kurt Kirkwood is revered by bands like; Uncle Tupelo, Pearl Jam, Guns and Roses, Chili Peppers and countless others.

"Violent Eyes" and "Flaming Heart" represent the heavier edge that the boys like to experiment with and reassures loyal fans that the band is still into all types of music from punk to country.

"TOO HIGH TO DIE" is not a departure from any Meat Puppets formula. It's an accomplishment that marks the beginning of the end of the beginning. Its altitude is marked, but its destination is unknown. This suggests to the world that someone in a high place is changing the perception of what we fans would be willing to die for.

4. FIREHOSE: mr. machinery operator

LABEL: COLUMBIA

This album is not a new release.

I don't even plan to review it!

The reason it has been included in this section is to inform and to educate. My motive? Well, the Meat Puppets released a new album and I felt that I should not include one band without stressing the importance of the other.

I had originally planned to make a great long spiel about the history of ex-SST recording artists, FIREHOSE, but I had to re-approach the situation in an econo-fashion due to time and space.

FIREHOSE was once the infamous band the Minutemen until "bearish" guitarist/vocalist, D. Boone, was killed in an automobile accident in 1985.

The Minutemen formed in 1978 out of San Pedro, California. In the early days, the band recorded in their garage and sometimes in their living room.

In 1980, SST issued the very young Mike Watt, D. Boone and drummer George Hurley a recording contract. Punk had burned itself out, and the post punk movement that spawned such acts and notables as Black Flag, Husker Du, Richard Hell, The Jam, The

Replacements and many others began to take hold of young alternative America.

The Minutemen recorded many great albums, but perhaps the most notable is "Double Nickels on the Dime." This release launched the band into a cult-like status. They also made a low budget video for "This Ain't No Picnic."

The Minutemen drew immense inspiration from their Arizona counterparts, but were sadly silenced in 1985.

Mike Watt had been immensely devastated by the loss of his long-time companion and bandmate. He went into seclusion for a number of months and didn't even bother to reform the defunct Minutemen.

Enter Edward Crawford (a.k.a. ed from ohio). Crawford was a consummate Minutemen fan who had been transformed from a James Taylor freak into an electric guitar player after witnessing one of the band's concerts.

Crawford was also shaken by Boone's death.

In late 1985, he made a bold move. He placed a call to Watt, who couldn't be bothered with talking to him, and then made the trip to San Pedro to audition for Watt. Somehow, Crawford and Watt clicked and decided to form a new band.

It was hard for the hose in those early years but they put out a great debut album entitled "Ragin full on" in 1986 and "if'n" in 1987. The following albums are also note worthy- "from ohio", "flyin the flannel", "live totem pole" and "mr. machinery operator."

Their latest effort has debuted on a major label. Does this mean that they are destined for stardom? Well, I don't know if these guys could stomach being a figurehead in the limelight. It seems that they just love to play music for a living.

-FACT- Mike Watt is the true bearer of the flannel shirt... but that's another story.

FACT - Each and every FIREHOSE album is dedicated to the

memory of D. Boone.

5. FIREHOSE: Big Bottom Pow-Wow

LABEL: COLUMBIA

Imagine the scenario. . . Flea, Mike Watt, and Chris Kirkwood sitting around in the studio talking about the power of the bass guitar with Les Claypool via phone hook-up. Bass summit of the 90s? A meeting of the minds? Well, yes and no.

It is obvious that the project was conceptualized and executed by Watt. Watt is acting as MC, which is fine but he often overpowers the comments and opinions that his guests offer. Still, if you ever had the privilege of talking with Watt you would realize that he is the type of person who lives to be a loud mouth anarchist. His conversations are loose and figurative and often dart lickety-split from idea to idea, which is also evident in his approach to playing bass.

This recording does not include many of the technical aspects of thumping on the "boom stick." These four string madmen explain their attack as a vent for aggression and anger. These feelings circulate throughout the depths of the bass clef and plummet right onto the stage for you and me to absorb.

Flea talks about the similarities between Led Zeppelin and Charlie Mingus. Watt relates the legend of Don Quixote as why the bass is important to a band and Chris Kirkwood sounds like he's adding fuel to Watt's fire, which causes many of the excerpts to self-combust. Les Claypool often just sounds foolish.

There is a lot to be learned through these conversations, and the cd is an excellent investment for all Meat Puppets, FIREHOSE and Chili Pepper fans.

The "BIG BOTTOM POW-WOW" is a strange ceremony shrouded in mysticism. Only a die-hard fan would make the time to attend.

Preston Reed: Turning a guitar into an orchestra

Ed Paukstr
Capital Times Staff

Preston Reed is a solo performer who is light years ahead of his time. His uncanny ability to interpret, imitate, and produce multiple orchestral and percussive sounds with nothing more than flesh, a few fingerpicks and an occasional plastic slide is astonishing.

Those who witnessed his performance in the Gallery Lounge on Feb. 15 would agree that he is a musician of extreme calibre and that he truly deserves the title "Guitar Virtuoso."

Reed, who is left-handed but utilizes a right hand style, plays the guitar in an unorthodox fashion like a pianist. His left hand floats above the neck of the guitar and is free to execute licks, grab unusual chords and run scales. His right hand taps, plucks, brushes, picks and produces percussive bongo-like sounds.

"What I like about it (my technique) is that both hands have a lot to do," Reed said, "this enables my left hand to do more than just make chords."

Reed's technique might leave you wondering if he is a contortionist but his style is so natural and free that it can also be envisioned as a canvas to paint images.

"I like to give the audience a picture of what's going on so they have a visual image of what the song is about," Reed said.

The soft-spoken Reed played eight songs during the performance, and some that are on his "Border Towns" cd.

Reed balances his folk sensibilities with techniques that encompass such genres as jazz, pop, rock, traditional and heavy metal music which form a melting pot of musical forms and ideas.

The song "Tribes," like many of Reed's tunes, incorporates open tunings which allow Reed to play chords by simply barring one finger across any number of strings. In its simplistic form, the style is reminiscent of Richie Havens, although it does encompass much more technique.

Reed employs many of the techniques mentioned previously in the song, "Hit the Ground Running," which catapults him to the composing as well as conducting arena.

The song "Slap Funk" is one of the first songs that Reed began playing in his unique style. There is an overall "bluesy" feeling throughout, and the song has a catchy bass groove that Reed creates simultaneously with the percussion and melody parts.

A traditional selection entitled "Day at the Races," was a refreshing twist to the set list. This song also has a blues feeling, but is juxtaposed by a spacey sequence, which is in turn counterpointed with a tribal sounding percussion section.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of all is the ability that Reed has to take a simple acoustic guitar and push it to the next extreme which enhances the instruments overall timbre and creates dramatic interludes and climatic endings.

The "slurpy" slide guitar in "Groundhog Rebels Against the System," is reminiscent of a pedal steel. This song has an overall country blues influence until it progresses to an aggressive delta blues attack on the strings. The conflict between these two styles within the song is resolved by a moody interpretation of proto type blues that extends way beyond feeling down and out.

During the course of the performance, Reed remained cool, calm, and collective and simply thanked the audience for their favorable reactions. Once in a while, he would reach into his pockets for a slide or finger picks before moving on to the next musical extravaganza.

Reed also offers remarkable interpretations of many of the styles that he casually mixes in each song.

The song, "Heavy Metal" is a prime example of his adventurous capabilities on the acoustic guitar.

Reed offered an explanation for every song. Some prolific, some serious and others uniquely imaginative in the approach to songwriting and composing.

One song entitled "Chatanooga," was written by Reed after playing in Chatanooga, Tennessee.

"It was a beautiful afternoon and I was walking through the streets that night. The whole environment was so serene that I was inspired to write a song based upon the sound of my footsteps hitting the sidewalk," Reed said.

It is hard to decipher one solid type of influence that would categorize Reed's music, and for this reason, he has been deemed "New Age."

"I don't know if New Age is an appropriate explanation," Reed sighed. "I'm not trying to save whales or anything! I think it could be best described as "Creative Acoustic."

Reed's style is in a category all on its own and he explains that he intends to be even more innovative in the future.

"There is always room for improvement and a need to go beyond what I have already accomplished,"

Reed said.

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