

THIRD EYE BLIND

Blue (Elektra)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Ken Barnes

After threatening to become the Spin Doctors of the late '90s with "Semi-Charmed Life" and disinterring the bones of Jane's Addiction on "Graduate," Third Eye Blind has found its own voice. Unfortunately, on a disquieting proportion of this second album, that voice is the most wretched falsetto since the last Smurf revival. (Check "The Red Summer Sun" or "Deep Inside Of You" for the most extreme Axl-Rose-attacked-by-groin-seeking-ferrets damage.)

Aside from that irritant and some dullish riff-raff on which "blue" turns to gray, this is bracing stuff. Like many modern rockers, First Eye Stephan Jenkins likes to use his catchy passages sparingly; unlike most, he's undeniably gifted at concocting them, and they brighten up most of the songs here, from the compact, punky opener "Anything" through the basic rockerama of "1000 Julys" and "Never Let You Go" to the semi-charming psychedelia of "Camouflage" and the nonfalsetto portions of "The Red Summer Sun." Jenkins also demonstrates a rapper's knack for assonance (juxtaposing "castle walls" and "basketballs" to good effect).

In going for a less-polished sound without sacrificing the hooks, Third Eye Blind has found a promising trail to blaze--though, vocally, it should definitely take the low road.

FOO FIGHTERS

There Is Nothing Left To Lose (RCA)

Rating 5 out of 7

By Ken Barnes

Trends and personnel may come and go, but Foo Fighters is becoming a band you can rely on. This third album further refines their classic rock-'n'-Grohl sound, a propulsive and tuneful brew also found on their first two albums and best exemplified here on first single "Learn To Fly." Its melodic irresistibility makes it the standout, but there's no shortage of similar pop-inflected rockers in their wheelhouse ("M.I.A.," "Gimme Stitches," "Next Year").

There's not a whole lot "modern" about the Foos' *Lose*. Echoes of the Who (on more than one cut, especially in the drumming), the Zombies ("Stacked Actors"), and the Beatles ("Next Year" and specifically an "Across The Universe" resonance on "Ain't It The

Life") crop up, while "Aurora" and "Headwires" could actually be described as stately.

Despite the occasional harsh, grungeworthy passage and the unpleasantly Frampton-esque vocoder-guitar effect on "Generator," the Foo Fighters are crafting a timeless style that should see them well into the next decade.

SAVAGE GARDEN

Affirmation (Columbia)

Rating: 3 out of 7

By Tim Sheridan

Like an economy-sized Backstreet Boys, this duo is ready for action. They've got the "young fresh sound" down pat. The hits are there, like the blurping synth-disco of "Chained To You" and the plaintive blue-eyed R&B of "I Knew I Loved You." Even better, they've got the looks for the entire audio-visual experience. Just take one glance at these two hotties and you can direct the music video: set them on a windswept hill, shirts unbuttoned and fists raised in protestations of their love.

The one curious thing is how depressing the tunes are. Songs of spousal abuse ("Two Beds And A Coffee Machine"), crumbling relationships ("Hold Me"), and crushing depression ("Crash And Burn") play out in radio-friendly musical settings. The wide-eyed self-help of the title track sounds almost like a bracing for the content that follows. These themes may be a play for artistic credibility, but it's rather hard to take them seriously with the candy floss that enfolds them.

PHISH

Hampton Comes Alive (Elektra)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Ken Micallef

Take a stadium full of stoned revelers and America's premier jam band and what do you get? One mad party, that's what. Recorded at Virginia's Hampton Coliseum during two concerts in November 1998, the six-CD *Hampton Comes Alive* documents Phish giving their hacky-sack-kickin' crowd exactly what they paid for: numerous covers, umpteen fan favorites, and lotsa previously unreleased tracks.

If you're not a fan of Phish's eclectic originals, you may still enjoy their choice of covers, which include Gary Glitter's "Rock And Roll Part 2," Will Smith's "Gettin' Jiggy Wit It" (preceded by Argent's "Hold Your Head Up"), the Beatles' "Cry

Baby Cry," Stevie Wonder's "Boogie On Reggae Woman," Chumbawamba's "Tubthumping," and Hendrix's "Bold As Love," among others. While most of these covers sound like Phish worked them up 20 minutes prior to performance, this is not a band for whom perfection is necessarily a prime directive. Phish do deliver immaculate versions of their own "Guyute," "Lawn Boy," "Meat," "Piper," and "Big Black Furry Creature From Mars," for starters. Ultimately, a must-have for fans only, the uninitiated should check out *The Story Of The Ghost* (1998) and *A Picture Of Nectar* (1992) to see what this Phish can really do. One thing though, where are the Peter Frampton covers?

DR. DRE

Dr. Dre 2001 (Aftermath)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Billy Johnson Jr.

Dr. Dre 2001 is a good record, but it's not *The Chronic*.

Dr. Dre 2001 is better than most records released this year, but it's not *The Chronic*.

Dr. Dre 2001 has a couple of the best songs I've heard in a good while, but it's not *The Chronic*.

What folks have to keep in mind is that it's not a cardinal sin for *The Chronic* to be Dre's only classic album in his pool of three solo records. When Dre released *The Chronic* seven years ago, the setup was different. The disbanding of N.W.A. still had the hip-hop community confused. Dre was feuding with Eazy-E and Cube. *The Chronic* was his opportunity to prove that his ingenious production work could co-exist without the direct support of two of hip-hop's most influential icons, not to mention M.C. Ren and DJ Yella.

Not only did *The Chronic* prove that Dre could survive, it showcased his ability to recreate himself as a lead rapper and the inventor of a new, even funkier brand of hip-hop that would direct a generation of producers thereafter.

Dre's collabs with Snoop, "Nuthin' But A 'G' Thang" and "Dre Day," won the mainstream and underground alike, and album cuts like "Stranded On Death Row" proved that Snoop wasn't the only new M.C. on board with exceptional skills. *The Chronic* set up Death Row Records with one of the most talented hip-hop rosters, including Tha Dogg Pound, the Lady Of Rage, and RBX. Anticipation for their forthcoming solo records was intense.

Dr. Dre really has nothing to prove today. Sure, *Dr. Dre Presents... The Aftermath* was a flop, but considering the drama brewing at Death Row at the time, Dre was not penalized for

releasing such a mediocre record. He did score half a hit with the album's likable single "Been There Done That."

Dr. Dre 2001's first release, "Still D.R.E.," comfortably readies the world for Dre's anticipated return. He's back with old partner Snoop Dogg and proclaiming that he hasn't changed, when in fact his focus has.

While Dre's G-Funk sound has been refined, laid-back and funky as ever--thanks to intricate live instrumentation--he's not the murderous gangster of yesterday. Now, instead of being inundated with shoot-outs, Dre's lyrics mix in a bit of introspective commentary about his day-to-day trials on "The Watcher," "Big Egos," "Forgot About Dre," and "The Message."

On the addictive, bass-grooved "The Watcher," for instance, Dre announces that he's not "a thug" while addressing his rationale for moving out of the hood: "How would you feel/If n-ggas wanted you killed/You'd probably move to a new house/On a new hill."

On other standout tracks, the Southern-twanged "Xplosive" and the booming club pick "The Next Episode" (featuring Nate Dogg doing his best ghetto crooning), Dre and his compadres merely unleash freestyles.

Dre also raises eyebrows elsewhere. Houston's Devin The Dude will finally get his props for his nasal, sing-song chorus on the nasty, '70s funkified "F.U." Sharp pianos and humming bass drive "Big Egos." Eminem lays some sincere sentiment over "What's The Difference"'s punching trombone samples, then joins Dre on "Forgot About Dre" to prove that they can rhyme 1000 words a minute. Protégées Hitman and Ms. Roq add whispery flows atop "Murder Ink"'s pulsating bass and tapping piano notes inspired by the theme music from *Halloween*. Mary J. Blige even adds her inner-city blues to "The Message."

Dr. Dre 2001 easily includes twice as many incredible songs than your average rap or R&B album of late. The problem is Dre's new crop of up-and-comers aren't nearly as talented as the original Death Row crew. Hitman, Ms. Roq, Knoc-Turn'al, and Six-Two make several appearances on *Dr. Dre 2001* and only warrant attention on the aforementioned "Murder Ink." Otherwise, their various appearances on the "Light Speed," "Let's Get High," "Bitch N-ggaz," "Ackrite," and "Bang Bang" drag on without one redeeming rhyme or rap style between them, leaving listeners to ponder Dre's motivation for featuring them so heavily on his album. It would have been better to showcase Xzibit, Snoop, and Eminem on more songs.

Additionally, the most important song on the album, "Some L.A. N-ggaz" featuring the all-star team of West Coast heroes M.C. Ren, King T, Xzibit, Defari, Kokane, Time Bomb, and Knoc-Turn'al, fails to live up to its potential. In giving props to the West

Coast, each M.C. begins his verse with a few lines from a California classic by Eazy-E, Volume 10, the Pharcyde, Ice-T, or Ice Cube. The idea is ingenious, but the lyrics and production are decent at best.

Even with the flaws, *Dr. Dre 2001* is highly recommended. Hell, if I program my CD player to play my favorite 10, I'd still have about an hour of nearly flawless songs to enjoy.

WILL SMITH

Willenium (Columbia)

Rating: 3 out of 7

By Billy Johnson Jr.

All pop-hop artists do the same thing. They sell millions of records, and when they are ousted from the hip-hop community for getting too "jiggy," they come back, crying.

Will Smith works hard on his new CD to remind us of the days when he was appreciated in hip-hop circles by incorporating plenty of nostalgic hip-hop sensibilities, and it's welcomed. There's beatboxing and storytelling from the masters Biz Markie and Slick Rick ("So Fresh"). "Rapper's Delight" type rhymes from Lil' Kim ("Da Butta"). And a multitude of '70s samples of everything from LTD's "Back In Love Again" to the "School House Rock" jingle "Figure Eight" (you won't believe it until you hear it). There's even "Potnas," a modernized rendition of Whodini's "Friends" produced by none other than Smith's old homie Jazzy Jeff, who thankfully tackles most of the album's production.

But it's actually Will's time travels--as also displayed in the "Will 2K" video--that remind us of his refreshing "Girls Ain't Nothing But Trouble," "Brand New Funk," and "Summertime" that make the present so painful. Whether responding to those who dismiss his popularity ("Da Butta," "Uuhhh"), attempting to be too cool ("Will 2K," "Wild, Wild West," "Can You Feel Me?") or too suave ("The Rain," "No More"), vocally, Will doesn't impress. Added collabs from Eve, Tatyana Ali, MC Lyte, and K-Ci help, but I'd pay to get just one more good record from the simply honest and goofy Fresh Prince.

RAEKWON

Immobilarity (Loud)

Rating: 4 out of 7

By B. Sarah Meadows

After the release of his debut LP *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx*, Raekwon soon became known for dropping classic material. One of

the most respected members of the Wu-Tang Clan--who are considered trendsetters in the hip-hop industry--Rae makes an attempt to recapture his place with his new project *Immobilarity*, but doesn't quite reach it.

He sets things up well and makes a good re-introduction with his first single "Live From New York." Rae uses the majority of his second highly anticipated offering to introduce his new crew, the American Cream Team. The entire crew represents on the posse cut called "Power," produced by Triflyn. The American Cream Team and other non-Wu affiliates dominate the album's production. No RZA, no 4th Disciple, and no Truemaster.

The only two Wu members present on the album are Method Man, who handles the chorus and drops a verse for "F--k Them," and Masta Killa, who lends his talents on "The Table." Standout cuts include the out-of-sight "Sneakers" produced by Pete Rock, "Real Life," and the Mafioso "Jury."

Throughout *Immobilarity* it seems like Rae is slowly trying to break away from the holds of Wu to do his own thing with the American Cream Team. Unfortunately, the album suffers as a result. But for all real Raekwon fans, the LP is worth at least a listen.

KELIS

KORN

Issues (Epic)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Sandy Masuo

By now Korn's signature seething angst and twisted tales are a familiar landmark on the hard rock landscape, but that doesn't mean Bakersfield's foremost aggro outfit is immune to growth. Over the course of four albums, the quintet has steadily refined its gnarly rock with playing sharpened by years of touring and a steadily expanding palette of sounds.

Sandwiched between the bagpipe and drum intro and the staticky white noise outro of "Issues" are the usual grinding rhythms and Jonathan Davis's idiosyncratic vocals plus a few pleasing, if not pleasant, surprises. Genuine harmonies lash out in "Falling Away From Me"; "Let's Get The Party Started" opens with guitars that are astonishingly naked without abrasive layers of distortion; the doomy dancefloor action in "Hey Daddy" is the funkier Korn kernel to date. The issues fueling Korn may be losing their shock value, but they're still charged enough to keep the band moving forward.

METHODS OF MAYHEM

Methods Of Mayhem (MCA)

Rating: 4 out of 7

By S.L. Duff

If nothing else, Tommy Lee has been good copy for a long time now. Whether on stage, in rehab, in front of the judge's bench, on video with Ms. Pamela, or belting photographers in beautiful Hollywood, it's hard to repress the man they call Tripod. Why waste all of these topics sitting behind a drum set? Lee has opted instead to go into hip-hop territory.

The results are a mixed bag. When Lee goes for the obvious, he sounds like a beginner in an already crowded field. The record opens with a collect call from L.A. County Jail, and from there it's Loops-R-Us, rote metal/industrial heavy guitar riffs, and analog synth blerps and bleeps a-plenty. When Lee raps, he sounds clumsy, often just hampered by a crappy rhyme. "77 million dollars made from watching me c--, under the sun on my vacation," he raps in "Get Naked," the single no less. Sounding more authentic but equally stupid is Lil' Kim, getting nasty with lines like "Ride the c--k 'til you hit the spot."

I don't want to get too negative with this diatribe, as the track "Anger Management" is not only the best title, but gives a glimpse at the barely controlled rage bubbling inside the time bomb that is Tommy Lee. Much of this hatred is directed at the press, so maybe a full-on scather ain't such a red-hot idea. So, on the bright side, when Lee mixes it up with some different elements and introduces actual melody lines into the vocals, things improve tenfold. With Kid Rock by his side, the disc's best track, "New Skin," emerges. A melodic chorus may be old-school to some, but it is the first major musical lift on this disc.

It happens again with "Crash," a piece that is more industrial than hip-hop, and underneath the tech trappings is really just a hard-rock pounder in new clothes. Scott Kirkland from Crystal Method joins in on two tracks, and those definitely have the CM stamp, which makes for some great listening, but doesn't help us figure out what Methods Of Mayhem is ultimately about. In a sense, this record is a baby step in the unblinking public eye that eye Lee can't (or won't) escape. If Lee continues to combine disparate musical elements as on the more choice selections, and can steer clear of Cliché City, he might be onto something. You do have to give him credit for getting completely "naked," so to speak, and taking a leap away from his safe hard rock home into something that, for him at least, is completely different.

TONIC

Sugar (Universal)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Sandy Masuo

Tonic only underscores what bands like Creed, Third Eye Blind, Seven Mary Three, and Matchbox 20 have already demonstrated. It's not that difficult to come up with a compelling, slightly grungy, medium hard rock sound and a clutch of catchy tunes. What's challenging is cultivating the emotional hook that will give the music lasting appeal.

Tonic's long-awaited sophomore effort is chock-full of hummable melodies, guitar work that's edgy but not metallic, and front guy Emerson Hart's bitter-sweet but unremarkable tales of failed romance. Too many tracks wallow in a mid-tempo melancholia that's engaging enough in the moment but doesn't really stick to your ribs; what the album needs is a few more spunky pop-rockers like "Sunflower" or a full-on display of boogie impulse that flutters fleetingly in "Stronger Than Mine." And as smoothly as "Sugar" goes down, it still feels like empty calories.

DANZIG

6:66 Satan's Child (Evilive)

Rating: 3 out of 7

By Rob O' Connor

Wouldn't you like to know how certain folks end up with the reputation they do? Like, how did a short, pudgy kid from New Jersey convince anyone that he was drinking pals with the Lord Of Darkness? Jimmy Page is one creepy dude, but Glenny? C'mon, it's like casting that kid from "Dawson's Creek" as a football jock. Willful suspension of disbelief can only take you so far.

Once a member of the Misfits, an above-average group of pop-punkers, Danziggy has since trudged in these lame pseudo-sludge metal waters. By now, he's ready to wrestle Ronnie James Dio for the dwarf-metal championship, seeing as how he's given up trying to sing and is happy to caterwaul like a petulant child who wants more attention and the high chair hiked up. "All I Save Is My Pain," he moans, at one point. All I save is aspirin, buddy. It says on the inside booklet "G.D. is endorsed by nobody." Exactly.

TERI THORNTON

I'll Be Easy To Find (Verve)

Rating: 6 out of 7

By Ken Micallef

You won't find Teri Thornton's name in any book, and you'll have even more trouble finding her records. But this veteran is perhaps one of the best singers in all of jazz. A small, beautiful woman who can growl like Betty Carter or purr like Carmen McRae, Thornton is a soulful bundle of experience, presence, and power: a dynamic performer who has survived all matter of hard times to finally record her major label debut.

And what an event it is. Thornton is a chameleon who can work any style to perfection. On "Knee Deep In The Blues," she belts and bruises the song like a resistive lover. "Somewhere In The Night" is haunting, smoky, and dramatic, a simmering ballad where Thornton floats with gossamer grace. She treats "I Believe In You" with Nat "King" Cole-like ease, and reinvents "The Lord's Prayer" as a Latin-tinged testament to faith and perseverance. This is the kind of music that makes you sit and listen, from a woman who has been there and back and has lived to sing about it.

MEDESKI, MARTIN & WOOD

Last Chance To Dance Trance (Best Of 1991-1996) (Gramavision)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Michael Lipton

Bending and combining genres--and then stretching them to the extreme--has been the hallmark of '90s music. If genre-hopping musical gymnastics be your thing, you most likely already own a MM&W disc or two. If not, this "best of" collection from this virtuoso NYC trio is a great way to play catch up. With roots in avant jazz groups like Marc Ribot and John Lurie's Lounge Lizards (and more recently, backing John Scofield and Iggy Pop), MM&W has successfully (critically and commercially) bridged the gap between the noodling of hippie jam bands like Phish, the intricacies of fusion, and the solid rhythms of Booker T. (For a more interesting take on the genre, youngsters may want to backtrack and check minimalist British prog-rockers Egg.) The grooves--notably on tracks like "Bemsha Swing" (from 1993's *It's A Jungle In Here*) and "Macha" (from 1997's *Bubblehouse*)--are earthy and solid. In addition to sampling cuts from the band's first five releases, the disc includes a previously unreleased live version of "Night Marchers."

PATRICIA BARBER

Companion (Premonition)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Tim Sheridan

In a few short years, Patricia Barber has established herself as one of the more exciting jazz singers on the scene. A fine pianist and composer, she is also notable for her treatment of pop and rock tunes in the jazz idiom. These interpretations are nothing less than charming, but often revelatory.

As she proves here, she is also a great live performer. This disc, captured at Chicago's Green Mill, finds her reinventing a few surprising classics and investing some serious soul in her own work. Sonny Bono's "The Beat Goes On" becomes a groovy meditation on "where it's at" and "Let It Rain" never sounded so blue. "Like J.T. (For Jacky Terrasson)" is a free-flowing ode, featuring stellar guitar work by John McLean. Throughout, Barber is well-served by her entire band--bassist Michael Arnopol, drummer Eric Montzka, and percussionist Ruben P. Alvarez. It's an intimate, unaffected exploration filled with soul and wit.

DON SEBESKY

Joyful Noise: A Tribute To Duke Ellington (RCA)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Ken Micallef

Jazz arranger/trombonist Don Sebesky is of the old school. Best known for his '70s albums *The Rape Of El Morro* and *Giant Box*, Sebesky cut his teeth in an era when jazz was taking stock after the music explosion of the 1960s, when the jazz scene had turned inward after the promise of jazz rock and free jazz had soured.

Consequently, it's not Sebesky's style to pay slavish homage to past greats. And with Duke Ellington, that comes as a bit of shock. Thanks to Wynton Marsalis, we are accustomed to hearing Ellington played with a reverence bordering on parody. But in his liner notes to *Joyful Noise* Sebesky writes, "My intention was not to imitate Duke." Except for the familiar melodies of well-worn classics like "Mood Indigo," "Caravan," "Satin Doll," and "Creole Love Call," Sebesky is true to his word. Some songs originally conceived as ballads are now uptempo and in odd meters, others are arranged to reflect Sebesky's work with Freddie Hubbard, Wes Montgomery, and Paul Desmond.

This is not Ellington as heard on some crusty 78 vinyl antique, this is Ellington supercharged and flying high, drenched

in hot solos from Tom Harrell, Ron Carter, Dennis Mackrel, John Pizzarelli, and Phil Woods. Brash, bold, and sunny, *Joyful Noise* is practically more about contemporary big band style and Sebesky himself than it is about Ellington.

The arrangements are dynamite, and the solos are excellent. Would you really want to hear these standards "one more time" in their original form? Sebesky has done a great job injecting energy into tired warhorses. But at times, the flash and fire of *Joyful Noise* is as thin on the ground as hearing "Misty" played by a wedding band. As a fresh Ellington interpretation, *Joyful Noise* is sketchy. But as a scalding example of contemporary big band, it's a killer wearing white gloves.

SHERYL CROW

Live In Central Park (A&M)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Ken Barnes

From a largely forgettable first album (save for the unforgettably irritating "All I Wanna Do"), Sheryl Crow has made remarkable strides since she asserted full control on her second album. She's managed the singular accomplishment of blending Dylan's sneer and lyrical loopiness and the Stones' propulsive riff-crunching, an achievement no female rocker (and precious few dudes) has pulled off. It's only fitting that Keith Richards is among the guests acknowledging Crow's well-deserved ascendancy here, although he does so in typically piratical fashion, commandeering the band to sing his own "Happy" with Crow relegated to a verse plus backgrounds.

Elsewhere amongst these concert selections (it's longer than the Fox broadcast but doesn't encompass the entire show), Chrissie Hynde proves an admirable choice to collaborate on "If It Makes You Happy," the Dixie Chicks add zest to "Strong Enough," and Sarah McLachlan duets pleasantly on the pretty "The Difficult Kind." Stevie Nicks and Eric Clapton follow Keith's lead in reprising their own material, the former in strong voice on "Gold Dust Woman" and the latter thundering through "White Room."

But it's Crow's show. Some of the songs are a touch long, new track "It Don't Hurt" doesn't sound quite up to snuff, and "All I Wanna Do" is unavoidably present in all its faux-boho-a-go-go languor. But the hits from albums No. 2 and 3 are thrilling, and she wraps up the whole Dylan/Stones combo platter by ringleading the entire cast through a rip-roaring "Tombstone Blues." This keepsake's a keeper.

ALANIS MORISSETTE

Alanis Unplugged (Maverick)

Rating: 5 out of 7

By Ken Barnes

How perfect a choice is the Police's "King Of Pain" for Alanis Morissette's first high-profile cover version? Sting's abstract angst-fest clearly strikes a major chord with the woman who put the bleak into oblique, and, abetted by the *Unplugged* format, she turns in a gorgeous version.

Going *Unplugged*, no matter how premature or mystifying it may seem in career-move terms, is a productive musical move for Morissette, freshening the four over-familiar hits from *Jagged Little Pill* (main beneficiaries: "Head Over Feet" and especially a piano-based, stridency-softened "You Oughta Know") and emphasizing the melodiousness of the three *Infatuation Junkie* tracks (notably "Joining You"). On the other hand, the acoustic settings throw her characteristic syllable elongation and free-form declarations (will she ever meet a meter or rhyme scheme she can stick with?) into starker relief.

But there's no relief from the laundry lists of philosophical questions recited on all three new songs here. Among the ponderings on "These Are The Thoughts" is this poser: "Can blindly continued fear-induced regurgitated life-denying tradition be overcome?" Not without a portable phone, apparently, since in the same song she wonders, "Why do I feel cellularly alone?"

The strangest thing here, however, is that Morissette makes these indigestible masses of verbiage go down smoothly. For that alone, *Unplugged* deserves a plug.

NATALIE MERCHANT

Live In Concert (Elektra)

Rating: 4 out of 7

By Tim Sheridan

No one could ever call Natalie Merchant a rock shouter. Since the debut disc by her former band, 10,000 Maniacs, her signature has been a wispy vocal technique that sounds like it was dosed with novocaine. To match this narcotic singing style, she has focused ever more on ultra-mellow, introspective songs that suggested intimacy between the singer and the listener. Apparently this disc is meant to be a document of her intimate style, captured live. Recorded during a series of dates at the Neil Simon Theater in New York, the emphasis is almost solely on emotive balladry. But rather than promoting intimacy, Merchant's

shtick acts as a soporific: not boring exactly, but akin to warm milk.

While the musical support is thoroughly professional and the recording excellent, much of the soundscape relies on atmospheric ornaments: subdued percussion and evocative guitar effects. Besides drawing heavily from her two solo albums, Merchant and her band also take on two classics in the canon of rock introspection: Bowie's "Space Oddity" and Neil Young's "After The Gold Rush," not making a distinctive impression with either interpretation. The best that can be said is that it isn't an unpleasant experience, but it's also not particularly affecting. That is unless you're operating heavy equipment.

ANI DiFRANCO

To The Teeth (Righteous Babe)

Rating: 4 out of 7

By Rob O'Connor

There once was a guy named Jack Kerouac and he wrote and wrote and wrote and it was almost as if for a time he didn't do anything else. He either had no friends who would be honest with him or he was just stubborn, but while a great many of his words were inspiring and satisfying, many more could have used a smart editor.

Ani DiFranco is still no Mark E. Smith (or Billy Childish, for that matter), but she does release albums at a rapid-fire pace. Each album has its moments to recommend, but somewhere in the middle there is always a sag--usually at the point where Ani thinks she's got the funk. For this album, she's added Maceo Parker on several tracks, and the guy who used to make money as Prince adds vocals to a cut, as well.

But no matter how Ani might think herself a wild and swinging girl, she's at her best at her most conventional, when she's singing quiet and letting her heart hang out ("Hello Birmingham"). So be her friend and let her know she doesn't have to be weird for anyone.

GRATEFUL DEAD

So Many Roads (Arista)

Rating: 6 out of 7

By Stephen Peters

Conventional Deadhead wisdom has always maintained that whatever it was that generated that mercurial

essence, that intangible Oneness gestalt, that heady mix of certifiable madness and giddy gladness that imbued the live Grateful Dead experience, it could never be captured within the confines of a box. In fact, the idea of five discs of "previously unreleased" material must have caused a collective giggle among a diehard taping contingent that has been circulating copies of most of the songs in question for decades.

Nevertheless, both newbies and dyed-and-true fans alike will find something to love about *So Many Roads*, a collection that defies another kind of conventional wisdom in its attempt to chronicle the Dead's long, strange, 30-year career.

The set is almost as notable for the tracks it doesn't include as for the ones it does. For instance, what other band would have the gumption to release its first major career retrospective and not include its only Top 10 hit (in the Dead's case, 1987's "Touch Of Gray")? Or for that matter, any of its best-known radio staples--among them "Truckin," "Casey Jones," "Uncle John's Band," or "Alabama Getaway?"

Instead, listeners are treated to a well-mapped historian's journey worthy of Alan Lomax, from "Can't Come Down," a Dylanesque original that kicked off a 1965 demo tape recorded under the band's pre-Dead nom de tune of the Warlocks, to "So Many Roads," a latter-day fan favorite captured here during the group's last concert performance together on July 9, 1995. The set even comes with a road guide in the form of a hard-bound booklet that includes essays on the band by prominent Dead scribes.

Though there are plenty of worthwhile stops on this six-and-a-half hour tour; perhaps the most rewarding are found among the early rarities that appear here in pristine, straight-from-the-vault condition for the first time; a live 1968 take of the jazzy "Clementine," an ambitious Robert Hunter/Phil Lesh original that was mysteriously shelved after only a handful of known performances; a 1970 studio version of "Mason's Children," which was recorded for the band's seminal

American Beauty disc but didn't make the final cut; "Chinatown Shuffle," an obscure track written by Dead co-founder Ron "Pigpen" McKernan and played primarily during the group's 1972 tour of Europe; and a jam recorded during a soundcheck for a now-legendary pair of appearances at Watkins Glen, N.Y., in 1973.

Granted, there are a few rough spots along the way here, and many of what are widely acknowledged among fans to be the Dead's all-time best performances go unrepresented. But by the time the excursion ends with a generous sampling of live and studio versions of songs that were slated to appear on a new studio release before the death of guitarist Jerry Garcia in 1995, the listener is left with more than a passing glimpse of the depth and breadth of a group that so many dismissed years ago as acid rock casualties. And while it's a pilgrimage that often takes a road less traveled, it's definitely worth the trip.