

records

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Surman tries for new sound

John Surman
Such Winters of Memory
(ECM)
●●●

In recent years, British reedman John Surman's records have been so similar that it's often hard to tell them apart. There is usually a backdrop of gently programmed computer synthesizers (can programmed synthesizers ever sound gentle? Surman amazingly manages to achieve this effect.). Sometimes the electronic timekeeper is substituted or supplemented by a human percussionist. Surman uses this background rhythm as the starting point for his baritone, soprano, and bass clarinet explorations.

On *Such Winters of Memory* Surman has decided to break away somewhat from this unmistakable sound. The main change is the addition of Norwegian singer Karin Krog. Krog has been performing with Surman for years now, but this is their first recording available this side of the Atlantic.

From her dry, restrained delivery on "My Friend," which sounds remarkably like Sheila Jordan with a mild Scandinavian accent, to her spooky background colorings on "Saturday Night," Krog injects that intangible human element that sometimes seems to be missing in Surman's work.

This is not to shortchange Surman. Not only is he a fine multi-instrumentalist, but quite a good composer as well. His work, however, was beginning to be slightly repetitive. Fortunately John Surman had the courage to change his format a bit. The result, with the help of a friend, is that this time he has produced a more satisfying mood record.

—HOWARD GOLDSTEIN



M + M melts in our ears

M+M (Martha and the Muffins)
Mystery Walk
(RCA)
●●●

M+M (formerly Martha and the Muffins) have very quietly become one of Canada's most successful international acts. Though their last three albums have not had the commercial success in North America of their debut album *Metro Music* (with the hit single "Echo Beach"), they have managed to garner high marks from the critics and have attracted a rather sizable international following. Like many Canadian bands, they had to be recognized abroad before achieving any domestic success.

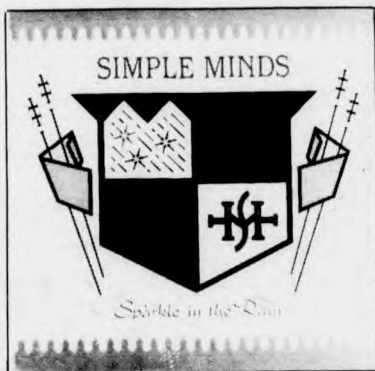
Mystery Walk, like their last record *Danspare*, is essentially a two-person project. Martha Johnson and

Mark Gane, the co-songwriters for Martha and the Muffins, have found it financially draining to maintain a full-time entourage and have dropped most of the Muffins in favor of proven studio musicians. The album is highly influenced by the drum-work of Yogi Horton—a first-class session drummer who played on most of the tracks on David Byrne's award-winning dance score, *The Catherine Wheel*.

Both Johnson and Gane seem highly influenced by the work of Byrne and, particularly, Brian Eno. The new album includes several tracks with the hard-edged bass lines and spacy synth effects that one immediately associates with Eno's distinct style.

From the first album, M+M have been a progressive group, even the stock pop tunes had their own characteristic sound. *Mystery Walk* isn't innovative compared to Eno and Byrne, but it does bring some of their more unusual musical phrasings into the realm of popular music. While the lyrics are pared down and simplistic they are sincere, covering new angles of familiar social and political issues. What's more is their consistent rejection of nihilism and despair; they choose to pursue solutions with a naive faith and optimism. Nothing they say is particularly new or inspired, and yet the album's essential sanity and the band's commitment to their work are more than enough to carry the show. *Mystery Walk* is witty, intelligent, and compelling—music that is allusive rather than derivative.

—KEVIN CONNOLLY



Inexorable physicality

Simple Minds
Sparkle in the Rain
(Virgin)
●●½

When a group releases an album that towers above the masses of aural mediocrity the way Simple Minds' *New Gold Dream* did in 1982, waiting for its followup can be agonizing. *Sparkle in the Rain* thus comes as a disappointment to those expecting more of the radiantly compelling, soft-focus glitter of *New Gold Dream*.

Instead of the swirling blankets of keyboards and subtle propulsion that permeated that more introverted album, *Sparkle* rushes out at you with uncompromising physicality. This is partly due to the greater emphasis on the ferocious drumming of now-permanent member Mel Gaynor, who provides the backbone for the Minds' new sound.

In a way this sixth album marks something of a return to an earlier Simple Minds style, but the mix is more dense and muddy than ever before. Consequently, their magic is lost somewhere in the cacophonous din, behind the pounding drums and noisy guitars. Where on *New Gold Dream* Jim Kerr's voice had a haunting subtle power, here it tends to come off as mere histrionics.

The problem reveals itself most clearly on their cover of Lou Reed's *Street Hassle*: How can a bunch of fashionably post-punkish, middle-class Glasgow boys deliver the sincerity required by lines like "Sha la la la, he entered her slowly and showed her where he was comin' from/Sha la la la, He made love to her gently, it was like she'd never ever come." Instead, Simple Minds build up this stark teenage tragedy

(girl meets guy and, next thing you know, she's pregnant) to a full orchestral intensity topped off with some glaringly obtrusive acoustic guitar strumming.

For all the dense and undisciplined energy on this album, *Sparkle*, sounds too compressed, too all-out-in-front. The group is more self-assured than ever, and quite electrifying on tracks like "East as Easter" or "White Hot Day." This latter shows them at their best, alternating between a velvety, keyboard-blanketed propulsion and wild abandon.

Finally, the album's closer, the instrumental "Shake Off the Ghosts," with its shuffling percussion and exultant harmonies reminds us that Simple Minds can create some of the most hauntingly beautiful music around. If they are really "shaking off their ghosts" one wonders where they'll head next. It just seems unfortunate that they didn't explore the subtle, dark riches of *New Gold Dream* territory a little more fully.

—ADRIAN IWACHIW



Absolutely the worst

The Expression
The Expression
(A&M)
½

Here's my candidate for worst album cover of the year, and things get even worse once you open the jacket. Not only is the music completely bland and tasteless, but the words (masochistically rendered on the inside sleeve) are an absolute insult.

Each song is a grab bag of current musical clichés. The tunes are ill-conceived and poorly paced with unstructured instrumentation as the only context for noxious vocal warbling. Why is it that everyone these days has slipped into this Simple Minds cum Brian Ferry falsetto? Such consistent stylistic ripoffs serve only to make much of the 'new music' unbearably dull.

Australian bands (this group hails from Sydney) are not well known for their originality and, as you might expect, *The Expression* is no exception. What's worse is that they even have poor taste in who they decide to steal from:

A total eclipse, you turned out the light.

A total eclipse of the heart.

Sound familiar? What has really been eclipsed here is any sense of taste, intelligence, or artistic integrity.

The Expression are nothing more than another example of bastardized colonial posturing, the seemingly inescapable afterbirth of legitimate musical trends. The album leaves you with nothing but a pained expression, a thinner wallet, and possibly, third base in a pick-up baseball game. In short, cruelty to vinyl.

—K.C.

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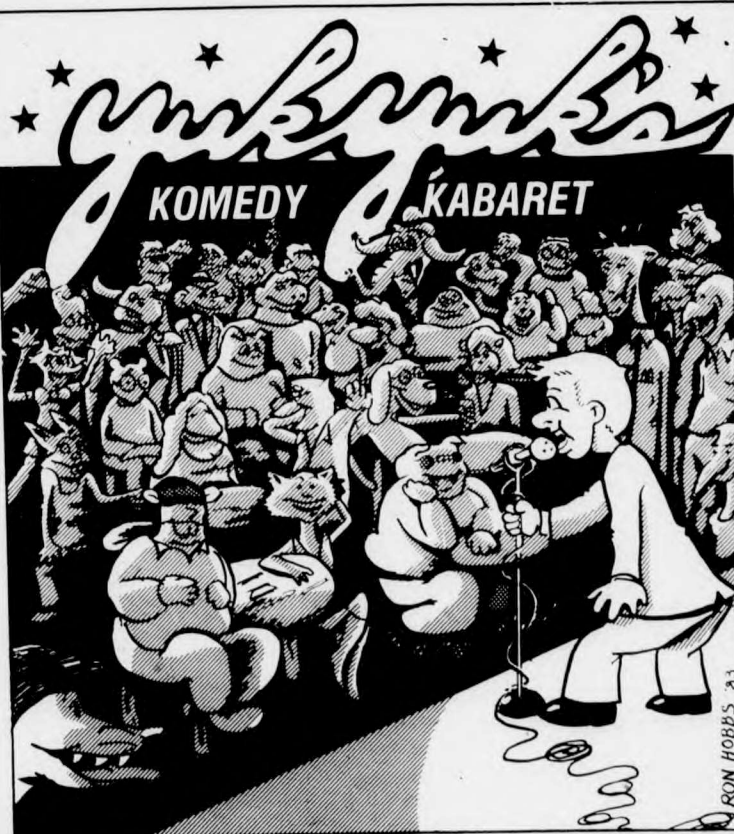
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