

Book Review

Infamous Canadian murders documented in paperback

PHILIP VENTZKE THE BRUNSWICKAN

Lethal Marriage by Nick Pron

Two paperback versions write of the unspeakable crimes of Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka. The first is by UNB graduate Brian O'Neil, author of the New Brunswick bestseller, Bodies in the Backyard, a choppy account of the life and crimes of Noel Michael Winters of Saint John. O'Neil was recently convicted for threatening the life of Nick Pron, Toronto Star crime reporter and author of the other Bernardo/Homolka rendition, Lethal Marriage. While one writer desires to kill another over his competing book reeks of the stuff that made Angela Lansbury a household name, O'Neil's felony conviction makes me wonder whether Lethal Marriage is worth all the fuss.

Well, for starters, Pron surprises as he writes. He believes Homolka had enough humanity in her to have done something—anything—to save Leslie Mahaffy and Kristen French. But Pron finds nothing redeeming in Paul Bernardo. His rapes and his murders were unforgivable; the man was morally unreachable.

Homolka had many chances to go to the police but she did not. Experts claimed Homolka was paralyzed by "abused-wife syndrome"; and if anyone was a candidate for that affliction, it was Homolka. Graphically detailed are the years of brutality Homolka willingly endured at the hands of her husband. Reading about Homolka's day-to-day life with Bernardo is more than enough to make a sadist wince. But this abuse excuse gets nowhere within the moral framework of Lethal Marriage. Pron brands Homolka a manipulator, eager to do anything for

Bernardo—and to other people—all in hope of somehow making her marriage the one of her dreams.

And then there is the 12 year sentence Homolka received in return for testifying against Bernardo. Pron makes Homolka's plea bargain look like slime on fine china. Pron tells that after she reached her bargain with the prosecutors, Homolka was accused of thwarting Kristen French's escape from the house of her captivity. Homolka knew Bernardo was out of the house to fetch a fast-food last supper for Kristen French. When Bernardo returned, Homolka's compassion oozed only as far as asking her husband to kill the girl painlessly.

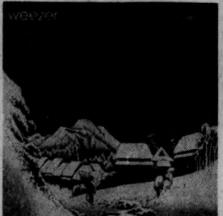
Pron sympathizes with the police forces responsible for arresting Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka, but all compliments from Pron are backhanded. The Toronto and Niagara Regional police departments get slapped by Pron for jumping to conclusions, mishandling information and taking months to get around to analyzing DNA samples volunteered by Bernardo long before he abducted Mahaffy and French.

Pornography and crazed-killer novels like American Psycho were viewed and read avidly by Bernardo. Pron shows how Bernardo's rapes and murders mirrored the text and action of the media images he so adored. Bernardo wanted to be like American Psycho's deranged yuppie; he yearned to rape like "the king" he admired in a sadistic sex film.

Lethal Marriage shines light on the darkest impulses of the human soul. Despite Homolka's abused wife syndrome and the influence of violent media on Bernardo, Pron holds this loathsome couple responsible for what they did. More accurately Bernardo was evil for what he did to Leslie Mahaffy and Kristen French; and Homolka, for what she did not do to help them.



Phono-Comb's record company seem to be going to great lengths to cover up some of the band members' past. And that probably has something to do with the fact that surf music has become so passé these days, thanks to the likes of Quentin Tarentino. But I won't beat around the bush—two of Phono-Comb used to be in Shadow Men In A Shadow Planet. There - I've said it. The other personnel might come from The Sadies and Fifth Column, but somehow you can't get past The Shadow Men. And in the same way that the Shadow Men tried to deny their influences (there was a song called 'We're Not A Fucking Surf Band' on their final album, Sport Fishin'), Phono-



Comb's press release mentions all kinds of music including country as being important to the band. Now, I can't deny that the overall sound of Fresh Gasoline (for that is the new album's name...) is more eclectic than some of the other previous bands, but we kind of knew that already thanks to Phono-Comb's debut CD that was fleshed out by the vocals of Jad Fair. But without the verbal distraction, this basically sounds like another Shadow Men album with a little more variety - that

isn't a bad thing at all, but it just makes me feel like I'm using the words 'Shadow Men' more than I should. So let's try and do it another way; there are lots of twangy guitars and songs of varying tempo with a couple of covers thrown in for good measure - they even add some vocals on the final track. And in summing up, I have to mention the Shadow Men one last time, but not very loudly - Phono-Comb are very nearly their own band. Very nearly.

On her last album, Suzanne Vega did something vitally important - she reinvented herself. Her meandering, folksy songs had become so predictable that Canadian comedy trio, Corky & The Juice Pigs had incorporated their impersonation of her into their act. And, if the truth be told, they out-Vega-ed Vega. But 99.9°F saw Suzanne and producer Mitchell Froom mix the clanging sounds of industrial music with her beloved acoustic guitar in a very unique and inspired way. Suddenly, she was making music worth listening to again.

Four or so years have passed, and Suzanne Vega is back with a new album, and she is still collaborating with now-husband Mr. Froom. Has anything changed? Well, Nine Objects Of Desire finds her forgetting about all the good work she achieved on 99.9°F and returning to her roots. And while that doesn't mean Nine Objects Of Desire isn't a bad album, it is a little on the unadventurous side: thirty-nine minutes pass by without any real surprises, and it suffers because of it. This time round the non-folky influence comes via a surprising influence - Astrid Gilberto - and that means

she uses some of those exotic rhythms to add a little variety to the proceedings. Some songs do stand out (such as 'Caramel' and 'Stockings') - she hasn't lost the ability to write a decent tune - and the entire album can be described as being pleasant. But in light of her past form, this is rather disappointing.

Apology time. When I reviewed Weezer's debut album, I doubted them. I doubted their staying power. I soon regretted it as I grew fonder of that record the more I listened to it. So that has led to me being a little bit more open-minded when it came to Pinkerton, their sophomore release. For one thing, I've listened to it quite a few times just to see if it possesses the same kind of quality. And guess what? It does. The immediacy is there, but so is the subtlety that makes for an album that has lasting appeal (the thing I doubted that Weezer had in the first place). Pinkerton is a bit louder (for the most part) than its predecessor (with the kind of unrestrained noise that comes when you ditch Ric Ocasek as producer and take



over yourself), but retains the utter catchiness that made that damned 'Buddy Holly' song stick in your head for days. Ironically, the opening track ('Tired Of Sex') is probably the weakest on the album, but it does set the scene lyrically for the album - lots of tales of unrequited love, getting dumped and never getting the girl at all (sometimes because she's

gay). Basically, Pinkerton celebrates the nerdiness that Weezer have been noted for, but does it via some very good pop songs - this time, I will acknowledge Weezer's brilliance immediately.

And now, as they say, for something completely different. There was a time that classical music was an easy thing to define - a spot of Mozart or Beethoven, and there you were. But now things are a bit more confusing, and nowhere is that more true than with Rachel's. For one thing, you don't expect classical music to come out on the influential Chicago label Quarterstick. Nor do you expect members of such bands as Shellac and The Coctails to be involved. But as I said earlier, things are a bit more confusing now.

The Sea And The Bells is Rachel's third full length album (following on from last year's magnificent Music For Egon Schiele), and it is their most perfectly formed record to date. The thirteen pieces performed (the word 'song' seems somehow inappropriate...) do not appear to be linked thematically, but they flow into each other effortlessly. The intricate string arrangements seem reminiscent of Michael Nyman in places (but without that element of disappearing up one's own behind), but they still retain their own identity. And then there is Rachel Grimes' wonderful piano playing which drives so much of the music. To be honest, it is so very hard to describe the downright beauty of it all without gushing too much. But I will say that The Sea And The Bells is stirring, soothing, calming and a whole lot more - you owe it to yourself to buy this album.

Aren't you a Brunswick member yet? You're supposed to be here by now! See you soon.

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