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The Damned Fool Circle

by Michael McCarthy

Record Reviews: **The Fool Circle**, Nazareth; **The Black Album**, The Damned.

Nazareth has earned ten gold records and nine platinum ones in Canada, according to their A&M publicity people. Eschewing the obvious question, which is best left to be answered by a thorough sociological study, or possibly conclusive medical evidence that some people's auditory apparatus is located in a position lower and posterior to that of the majority, one is still left with the distasteful fact that there are going to be approximately 50,000 Canadians who are going to be very disgusted and angry after listening to, or worse, buying, Nazareth's latest LP **The Fool Circle**.

There is not a single redeeming song on this album, which might provide solace for having bought it, or wasted time listening to it. None of the songs are well written. Dan McCafferty's vocals are abysmally painful and rasping, a flaw made ten times as bad by the fact that the voices are mixed way too high, and the instrumentals left in the background as though they were coming through a crack in a door far away. This may be an attempt to hide the fact that the musicianship is so lacklustre, or that there are generally no more than two instruments played at a time, leaving holes in the music that you could drive trucks through. Worst of all, there are no fast or loud songs on the album, which you could turn up high enough such that you would be jolted out of worrying whether they were good or bad, a cataclysmic let-down from a band that has basically earned its following by being a heavy metal blast-your-ears-off group.

Most of the songs are written around the theme of politics and nuclear war threat, which Nazareth is apparently just waking up to. Evidently, they also have just discovered phrases which are overworked cliches for the rest of us, such as "Talkin's too late", or "The bear he roars in the East/But we ain't listenin'", or "All (the world's) diamonds and pearls/could never buy you". Many of the lyrics set a new standard for logic and continuity, as well as message, e.g. "So you think you're fat/Well that's a fact/But your well ran dry/So you had to walk another mile."

Of the ten cuts, three attempt to be rock and roll. "Dressed to Kill" comes closest, with its monotone driving bass. It suffers terribly, as do all the songs, from insipid, muted guitars, insouciant piano, and banal lyrics, not to mention the singing (dare one suggest that there is an attempt, as among most heavy metal groups, to copy the style of Robert Plant of the hugely successful Led Zep? No, surely this idea is too

far-fetched). The other two are too slow and repetitive, as are a ballad and a song called "Every Young Man's Dream", which consists basically of about 15 repeats of the title loudly, over a failed attempt at a Bo Diddley beat. The best song on the record is "Little Part of You, which is almost a catchy pop love song with semi-believable vocals. This is over-balanced by another pop song of Rod Stewart inanity, which features a stirring chorus of "Victoria, I could love you for a hundred years/And still want more of ya!" Also outstanding is a wimpish, melodramatic version of "Cocaine", done live and staged right down to the group of simpering teenagers who have been coached to brainlessly yell "cocaine" and then scream in exultation as if that were the height of rebellious freedom and self-assertion, which is somewhat sickening, especially considering the way in which the song is destroyed by a pseudo-reggae beat and obtrusive, anomalous bass line aiming at Rolling Stone funk. All the appeal of a Kiss concert. Once again, there is a curious lack of guitars.

Overall, the album is a gutless, slow, unimaginative glob of saccharine and banality, awful lyrics, painfully grating vocals, diminutive musicianship and no worth whatsoever.

Which brings us to the Damned's new release, which has no title on the cover, but has "The Black Album" on the label. This is a regrettable allusion to the Beatle's masterpiece "The White Album" (so-called by critics), and invites comparison which the Damned are ridiculously ill-equipped to withstand.

This album is not so much bad as just not good. Certainly the band has an abundance of energy, as do most of their English punk counterparts, and at times almost reach the releasing ebullience and manic gusto of the Mersey/Liverpool beat groups of the early sixties. Unfortunately, they also share with most of their contemporaries a crippling lack of writing ability. Thus, while for about a minute of the fast songs one is kept interested by the effort of the band and allure of the musical attack, the final two minutes of the average song are an increasing disappointment, as the same riffs are mechanically repeated, but with a feeling of falseness after the first time when they seemed fresh, and it becomes apparent that the band has nothing to say; they have no musical or lyrical statement to make which can sustain the song, no content of excelling musicianship or pleasing singing to maintain the listener's goodwill. In short, after several good starts, they repeatedly fall flat on their faces.

One must praise the battering ram attack on drums by Rat Scabies throughout the album; at times, he approaches the splendour of the late, lamented Keith Moon. The bass of Paul Grey is also notable on several songs, especially on Lively Arts, where he achieves a menacing growl reminiscent of the Strangler's at their best. This song also features interesting haunting synthesizers lurking on the fringe of the music. The rest of the songs on the first side are similar: fast, rambling rock and roll that goes on too long and loses its force and spirit. Attempts are made to broaden the scope of the music, such as slow, melodic inserts (a la Moody Blues) into the rollicking "Wait for the Blackout", which fail, and some interesting tempo changes in "Twisted Nerve", which is a forgettable song despite the obvious and appreciated effort being made. "Drinking About My Baby" resembles seminal Kinks' groups, and a screeching guitar break, but the song is too aimless, its effect being satisfactory and no more. There are no breaks between the songs. Aside from the general sameness of the music, the reason is not apparent. Perhaps the lyrics would provide a clue, if one could decipher the extended gregorian chants on a melodic line which pass for vocals on this album, but one can't.

Side two is much less satisfactory. Although "History of the World-Part 1" is the best song on the album, with its catchy melody, superior singing, and good keyboard/synthesizer work well worked together into a simpler and successful pop rock sound, and other songs tend to be slow, pointless semi-acoustic ramblings, ponderous and unpleasant to follow. In apparent experimentation, one cut features random chords produced with a hammer on strings, and another has a fractured electronic ending which reinforces the boring aura of the whole side.

If these boys could learn to write and sing, they would be able to parlay their energy and zestful musicianship into a real rock and roll triumph. As it is, while they are certainly miles ahead of tired, vapid businessmen like the Eagles, McCartney or Manilow, they're still only pale echoes of the original British rock groups, able to merely reproduce fleeting, but non-sustained moments of driving rock and roll such as the Beatles, Kinks, Who, etc., all did fifteen years ago, only much better than erstwhile successors like the Damned have so far accomplished.

