

# The Vinyl Phyle

**The Smithereens**  
**11**  
 Capitol/Enigma

11, the Smithereens third album, is uneven, and ultimately disappointing. One of the pre-eminent perpetrators of power pop, this New Jersey quartet fails to deliver on the promise of their previous work.

Pat DiNizio, the group's goateed lead singer/rhythm guitarist, is the main culprit here. Where his songwriting succeeds, the results can be exhilarating. The opening track on 11, "A Girl Like You," does everything that good power pop should do: a catchy melody combines with tough guitar power chords and a rock-solid rhythm section, and DiNizio's strong baritone caps a memorable tune.

Part of the problem with the rest of the record is that DiNizio isn't a very original songwriter. "Blue Period," a duet with Belinda Carlisle, starts out sounding like a Beatlesque ballad, complete with cellos. But the influence quickly turns into flat-out ripoff, with a harpsichord solo lifted straight out of "In My

—To call this stuff fatuous is being charitable—

Life."

But where the songwriting fails abjectly, the result can be excruciating. "Baby Be Good" is this album's nadir: over a trite chord sequence, DiNizio sings, "Baby be good, baby every night/Better be good, you know it's only right." To call this stuff fatuous is being charitable; maybe execreble is the right word.

Finally, whatever momentum is built up by the rocking numbers on side one comes to a grinding halt on side two. The songs plod with virtually identical tempos, with listless performances and unmemorable melodies.

The sad thing is that this record has a lot going for it. The title is a cool feference to Spinal Tap ("our amps go to 11"). The punchy production is provided by Ed Stasium, who has recently done stellar work for Living Colour. But all of this means nothing when the songwriting is mediocre. The definitive Smithereens is still their first album, *Especially For You*. 11 has a few good songs, but only the most indiscriminating fan would love the whole record.

- Paul Murphy

# THE SMITHEREENS

**Wire**  
**On Returning (1977-1979)**  
 Harvest/E.M.I.

Wire were early beneficiaries of London's punk revolution that broke down the boundaries of contemporary music in 1976. It was a time where music, or more accurately blocks of sound, could be used to say almost anything. "It was a de-construction, a piss-take of rock & roll music" says bassist Graham Lewis of Wire's early sound. "The structures were rock & roll, but taken apart and put together in different ways. This is how they go — but not quite." In the twelve years that they've been making records, Wire has always had that "almost but not quite" quality to their music. Their sound is almost completely unique: they take rock & roll or pop, turn it sideways, and combine that with wonderfully dark and mysterious lyrics that for the most part can mean anything you want them to. Wire manage to expand your mind without blowing it.

*On Returning* is a compilation that gathers a selection of Wire's music from their first three years. The album chronicles the band's progression from early thrash riffs like "1 2 X U" and "It's So Obvious" to songs that moved Wire out of punk and onto their own distinctive path. *On Returning* gives us some of Wire's finest early moments. "Reuters" is the dark story of a correspondent reporting from a country on the verge of collapse — or is it a person? "Practice Makes Perfect" and "I Am The Fly" are fantastic pieces and monuments to Wire's curious, ever-present tinnitus sound: a rhythmic buzzing of guitars leaving a rather compelling noise in your ears which never quite goes away. Compositions like the quiet "Outdoor Miner" and the rougher "A Question Of Degree" are other world-beaters, and as for the rest of *On Returning*, what isn't excellent is very good.

Wire are square pegs in round holes, even



Wire in a funny mirror

on their own albums. You can never nail them down to one sound, style, or theme. Obsessions, the media, acceleration, heart-ache, disturbance, observations. Wire's music is a lot of things but if it is any one thing, it is outstanding. *On Returning* contains twenty two examples of that outstance and it is perhaps one of 1989's most valuable releases.

- Michael Chevalier

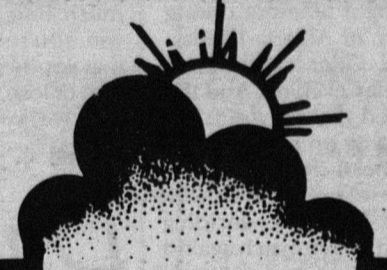
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