

New Order
Low-Life
(Factory)
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New Order's third full-length LP is better than even the most optimistic of the band's fans could have expected. After the breakthrough popularity of 1983's *Power, Corruption, and Lies* the band came up with two thinly disguised pitches for a larger audience; the tuneless "Confusion" and the winsome but over-produced "Thieves Like Us," both co-written and produced by American funkster Arthur Baker. Under normal circumstances, the dance-floor success of both these efforts would be considered resoundingly positive for the band; but then, nothing about New Order's circumstances, past or present, has ever

been what one would call 'normal.' Emerging (miraculously, some would say) from the ashes of Cold Wave kings Joy Division, New Order's prehistory has always been something of a mixed blessing. Laboring under the lingering shadow of dead Division singer Ian Curtis (the brilliant lyricist who committed suicide in 1980 on the eve of Joy Division's first American tour; he has been called 'the Jim Morrison of the '80s), the band has worked through accusations of fascism (a ludicrous label derived, it seems, from old Joy Division album covers and the new band's choice of names), the long bouts of post-mortem Curtis hysteria, and, hardest of all, the grudging re-acceptance by the cultish fans of their former band. While their brilliant, murky 1980 debut *Movement* established New

Order, and proved that Joy Division and very much been a 'group' phenomenon; the album found itself buried by the ongoing success of "Closer" and "Still," Division albums released shortly after Curtis's death.



Graham Parker and The Shot
Steady Nerves
(Electra/Asylum)
(Twin Tone)
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So far, Graham Parker has had only middling success in the 80's, due largely to his failure to find musicians to replace The Rumour, the backing band that made him one of the most intense sounds of pre-punk England. But with his new backing band, The Shot, and *Steady Nerves*, Parker has released an album that is the musical successor to *Squeezing Out Sparks*, his great 1979 LP. The Shot at least shares a knowledge of Parker's roots, which go far beyond the session flunkies he has used in the last few years.

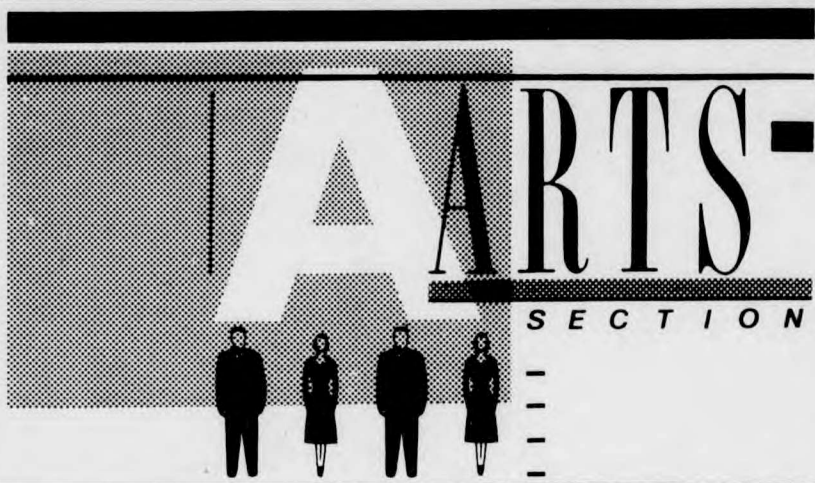
The driving support the band gives him is immediately established on "Break Them Down", a song about the aggressions of Christian missionaries towards the natives of the third world. The tone of defiance that is established on "Break Them Down" is shared by most of the songs on the album. Even the "romantic" songs are bluntly assertive. "Mighty Rivers", despite its 'I'll love you until the rivers run dry' chorus works because of this assertion and its honest, unselfconscious, lyrics which carry the metaphor off. "When You Do That to Me", another simply structured love song, holds back an undulating wave of passion due in part to the crescendo of the band over Parker's vocals and acoustic guitar.

While *Steady Nerves* succeeds

because it sees Parker returning to his R&B/Rock roots, he does deviate from his old sound with a few musical styles he has not used before. "Wake Up (Next to You)" captures a sweet soul groove, reminiscent of Motown, but avoids the sterile Motown mimicry of so many of Parkers' fellow Brits these days. "Take Everything", a fast pop jumper about capitalist values reminds one of the 80's pop of a band like the GO-GOs. Befitting its title, "Black Lincoln Continental" is another speedy rocker, with a quasi-rockabilly riff and Brinsley Schwartz's slide guitar. This song could almost be compared to Bruce Springsteen's latest work if Parker's lyrics did not satirize the part of America played out in the dream vehicle rather than romanticize its image as Springsteen tends to.

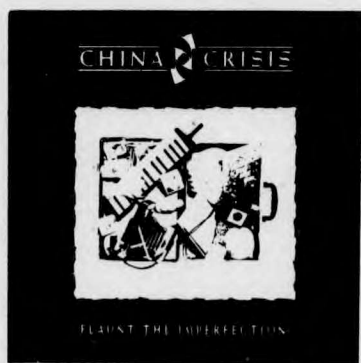
The only song that seems a throw-away of the eleven songs on the album is "The Weekend's Too Short". The 'living for the weekend' posturing on this track is a bit superficial for a man who once told us (*Squeezing Out Sparks*) that "Saturday night is dead."

Though *Steady Nerves* is a creation of the studio more than the pub scene, the co-production of Parker and William Wittman brings Parker up to date while avoiding the cold sound of his last two outings. Parker's defiant snarl on one of the cuts, "I can get by without the Rumour," at last seems justified. Graham Parker has dispelled any thoughts that he is another 70s artist ready for the trash heap.



China Crisis
Flaunt the Imperfection
(Polygram)
••½

Aptly named, this third LP from what we've come to think of as a progressive pop band is quite a disappointment. While there are some fine songs on this record (the dreamy "Black Man Ray," "The Highest High," and "Strength of Character" to name three), the album as a whole suffers from an annoying "sameness"; something of a surprise given the band's two previous efforts. Last year's *Working With Fire and Steel*, and the startling debut *Difficult Shapes and Passive Rhythms*, were both distinguished by an uncommon musical versatility, a diversity of rhythm and style noticeably lacking on *Flaunt the Imperfection*. Most of the songs here fall into the same category as a few of 'pleasant' pop songs that have formed a steady stream from the British Isles in the wake of the expired new wave; faint praise for a band with proven talent.



Though "King in a Catholic Style" adds some much-needed pep to the B-side, the following track lapses into formula funk; with the one exception there is none of the patented China Crisis blend of new wave and funk rhythm that spawned such hits as "Hanna Hanna" and "Working With Fire and Steel."

Walter Becker's glossy production, though it adds a certain charm to individual tracks, on the whole tends to flatten the group's sound, taking needed edge from Garry Daly and Eddie Lundon's vocals and diluting already thin synthesizer backdrops. Becker also seems responsible for the addition of a brass section on most of the tracks. Though the jazzy "Strength of Character" profits from the decision, the balance of the record seems to provide only a rash of pat saxophone breaks. After what we've already heard from China Crisis, 'bland' just doesn't seem good enough.

—Kevin Connolly

The Replacements
Let It Be

While essentially rooted in American punk, as typified by the Ramones, *The Replacements* sport musical influences as diverse as heavy metal, blues and new wave pop. *Let It Be*, their third album with the seminal garage band label Twin Tone Records, is a grab bag of songs along these lines. Though recommended for anyone seeking an interesting shake-up to their summer record collection, *Let It Be* suffers ultimately from a lack of consistency.

The force behind *The Replacements* is singer/songwriter/rhythm guitarist Paul Westerberg. Westerberg's rough voice is spirited and dominant; his songwriting at best is both personal and true to whatever musical style he attempts. "I Will Dare," a darkly tuneful pop ditty, and "Sixteen Blue," a country/blues wail, work because they stay controlled within the boundaries of their respective genres while expressing a bitter, heartfelt sense of loss—primarily that of the singer's lost youth and adolescence.

Westerberg's seriousness is admirable in these songs as he manages to avoid hints of pretentiousness or self-parody. His honesty however does not excuse the self-indulgence in "Unsatisfied," an attempt at a ballad in which he assumes that a 12-string acoustic and a lap steel guitar will raise his concerns above the level of self-pity.

The songs that the other members of *The Replacements* share in writing with Westerberg are all at the hardcore heavy metal end of *The Replacements'* sound. There is spitfire delivery in "Favorite Thing" and "We're Coming Out" and humor in the ripping "Tommy Gets His Tonisils Out," but by "Gary's Got A Boner" on side two *The Replacements* are reduced to regurgitating tired heavy metal licks. Excepting maybe "Favorite Thing" and a headbanging instrumental, "Seen Your Video," none of *The Replacements'* "loud fast" songs really match the originality of the "pop" in "I Will Dare."

If *The Replacements* want to live up their aspirations—touching the ground opened up by both the Ramones and REM at the same time—there has to be a definite gelling of the band on all their material. As it stands now, *Let It Be* is an album which is just as erratic as it is ambitious.

—Steve Baker

It wasn't until the group had scored some modest success with songs like "Ceremony" and "Everything's Gone Green" that New Order emerged as a major British band, while North American acclaim on any large scale eluded them until the more upbeat, dance-oriented offerings on *Power, Corruption, and Lies*. Here again the group ran into the two-edged sword of a cult following. The disco-style "Confusion" released later in the same year was thought of as too "commercial," and met with hostility from New Order/Joy Division purists.

But any fears that New Order were in the process of 'selling out' are likely to be laid to rest by *Low-Life*, released earlier this month. The commercial promise touched on by *Power, Corruption, and Lies* is still there, but on the whole the album is more of a return to basics for the band, the music here being more akin to 1981's "Everything's Gone Green" EP than it is the band's more recent efforts. With the exception of "Face-Up" and "The Perfect Kiss," both upbeat singles with hit potential, all of the tracks hold that plaintive tinge of melancholy that forms the backbone of New Order's best music. "This Time of Night," and the second side instrumental "Elegia" are both excruciatingly sad, while the overall effect of "Face-Up"—with lyrics like "As we grow old we lose our face/reflecting back the world's disgrace" and a chorus of "Oh, how I cannot bear the thought of You" superimposed on a frantic, brassy dance tune—is strange indeed, holding an ambiguous line between elation and pain. But then, the new New Order spend a good deal of their time anticipating their audience. Lyrics often allude to earlier New Order and Joy Division songs, while Bernard Sumner's naive renderings are all the more effective when seen in the context of their highly poetic predecessors. On "Low-Life" Sumner's classically weak but highly stylized vocals are up front as never before, while the rest of the production on the album marks a tasteful retreat from the sometimes muddled excess of earlier efforts. The only dud here is 'sub-culture,' a song which has all the ingredients but fails on the vocals, which demand more of Sumner than he is capable of producing.

—Kevin Connolly



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