

LEFT of the DIAL

bandwidth



Rhett Miller
The Believer
(Verve Forecast)

Old 97's fans might have trouble recognizing the carefully coiffed, meticulously put-together Rhett Miller gracing the cover of *The Believer* as the same bespectacled, slightly geeky guy pictured inside the Old 97's fantastic break-out album *Too Far To Care* (Elektra, 1997). Probably the bid to transform Miller into a commercially viable heartthrob should have been obvious to anyone paying attention. He's not bad looking, and his songs always betrayed him as an eternal—and sometimes infernal—romantic with sappy tendencies that were thoroughly indulged on his 2002 solo debut *The Instigator* (Elektra). So, this time around Miller has a stylist and groomer (really, check the liner notes), and while a guitar is featured prominently in the cover photos, he doesn't actually play it on the record. All of this makes Miller an easy target for purists that rail against image over substance, but in order to write him off as just another pretty boy you'd have to overlook two important points. First, Miller is a damn good songwriter, an ace at creating pleasant melodies and memorable hooks. Second, there's something about his voice that makes him eminently likable. If the slightest trace of sentimentality exists in you, Miller will find it and use his blatantly honest lyrics, and that voice, to exploit it. "Help Me, Suzanne," "Singular Girl," and "I'm With Her" are airy, almost too nice, love songs similar to "Hover" and "Four-Eyed Girl" from *The Instigator*, while "Meteor Shower" is lush, soaring orchestral pop, and "Fireflies" (a duet with Rachael Yamagata) is a classic he said/she said story of love gone wrong that one might well imagine George Jones and Tammy Wynette singing. "Ain't That Strange" and "Delicate" are rockers with some glam influence and "Brand New Way" seems to cast Miller as a male counterpart to Aimee Mann, who co-wrote "I Believe She's Lying," *The Believer's* best tune, with Jon Brion.

—matt barber



Matthew Sweet and Susana Hoffs
Under the Covers Vol. 1
(Shout! Factory)

Robin Williams' oft-quoted line—well, quoted so frequently that it has lost any tone of humor with which it was originally told—is, "If you can remember the sixties you probably weren't really there." I know, the line isn't really all that humorous but it does make a point: fun isn't always all that memorable. With that in mind, this record was obviously recorded with a great sense of fun and, as such, isn't all that memorable. Frankly, I'd already forgotten that I had listened to it by the time the disc had stopped spinning and I predisposed toward liking it. On *Under the Covers Vol. 1*, pop-tunesmith Matthew Sweet and former-Bangle Susana Hoffs have assembled a collection of their favorite sixties tunes and covered them with an ear toward making them their own. It's a decent idea, though it has already been done and done better many times in the past, and the duo—who have taken to calling themselves Sid and Susie—clearly have an affection for the music that they're covering. Yet apart from delivering some very nice, well-recorded versions of these songs, the pair don't add anything new to the material. To be sure, it can be difficult to tread new water when you're covering such revered music. Most of the rock nerd heavyweights are represented by the material selected here and Sweet and Hoffs do their best to deliver chestnuts from Neil Young ("Cinnamon Girl" and "Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere"), The Velvet Underground ("Sunday Morning") and Love ("Alone Again Or") to little effect. I've had a few dreams like this in the past: "I wonder what it would sound like if Matthew Sweet sang 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue'?" As it turns out, it sounds a lot like karaoke which can be a rip-snortin' good time if you're 'faced at some bar with your friends but you probably wouldn't want to record for posterity. Having said that, there are some excellent musical performances from guitarists Richard Lloyd and Ivan Julian (frequent Sweet-collaborators and punk icons) but there's only so much you can add to *another* version of "Monday, Monday." I expect that both Sweet and Hoffs have pretty decent record collections. Let's hope they dig a little deeper for *Vol. II*.

—mark norris



Neko Case
Fox Confessor Brings the Flood
(ANTI)

It's been four years since Neko Case released her last studio album. Last time around, critics designated the songwriter as the reincarnation of one of the first ladies of the Grand Ole Opry. So, understandably, the anticipation and expectation heaped on *Fox Confessor Brings the Flood* has been great. At first, the brevity of Case's latest album could cause consternation among fans that have waited so long for it. But after a few listens it becomes apparent that the disc's length attests to its pith, and proves Case is able to convey more in 35 minutes than most current artists can in hours. From the intriguingly eerie Edward Gorey-esque cover drawings by Julie Morstad to the trailing notes of cello and hammer dulcimer on the final track, "The Needle Has Landed," *Fox Confessor* is a striking piece of work. Many of its songs evoke the kind of simple, surreal, and vaguely sinister images depicted in the album's packaging. Musically, it's still the classic country and '50s pop mixture listeners have come to expect from Case, with a bit more emphasis on the pop component in "That Teenage Feeling," "Hold On Hold On" and "Lion's Jaws," all sweetened with dreamy washes of backing and harmony vocals. Over the varied, atmospheric backdrop of instrumentation, including tenor guitar, violin, cello, piano and banjo, provided by a rotating band of ringers—The Band's Garth Hudson, Calexico's Joey Burns and John Covertino, Kelly Hogan, Giant Sand's Howie Gelb, and Dexter Romweber of The Flat Duo Jets, among others—the constant, captivating element is Case's deeply and indescribably sensual and seductive voice. It takes a few listens through for *Fox Confessor* to work its magic, mainly due to the fleeting quality of some of the tracks and the way Case ignores generally accepted models of song structure, but those repeated listenings eventually end up being time that is well invested.

—matt barber

Group Name: Open Music Ensemble
When/Where playing this week?
Thursday March 30 at 5pm, UB Art Gallery, Center for the Arts, University at Buffalo North Campus.

Band Members/Names/instrument...

Jenece Gerber, Voice; Rob Phillips, Speaker/Mime/Trombone; Todd Whitman, Saxophones; Steve Baczkowski, Low Reeds; Andrew Walsh, Contrabassoon; J.T. Rinker, Trumpet; Will Redman, Percussion; Casey Farina, Percussion; Otto Muller, Accordion/Piano; Bill Sack, Electric Guitar/Oboe; Ben Harris, Violin; Leah Muir, Voice/Piano/Violincello; Josh DeScherer, Contrabass; Chris Reba, Contrabass



When did the band form? The original band started off as "Augenmusik" in 2002. There were some changes made to the band as it switched its name to the Open Music Ensemble in 2004. Now the group consists of over a dozen performers and composers working in the Western New York area.

You might like our music if you like... John Cage, Tony Conrad, La Monte Young, Bill Dixon, Milford Graves, John Zorn, free improvisation, avant-garde classical music, silence and/or noise.

List of Recorded Releases

OME 1; MoWeR; Bird with Strings; Elephaant.

check out our record labels and order from:

www.eriorecordings.com

<http://openmusic.us/parabiosis/>

Upcoming events: If anyone is in the Boston, Portland or Bennington region the first week of April they might be able to catch a show from the Open Music Ensemble annual tour. The OME is playing in Portland, Maine at Local 188 at 8pm on April 2, Tufts University in Boston on April 3, and Bennington College on April 4 at the Carriage Barn 8:30pm. Later in the month in Buffalo, Will Redman's "Book" will be performed at Hallwalls on April 28 at 8pm.

Worst show the band ever played: At the Burchfield-Penney Arts Center we played an improvisation show in which our only audience members were the wives of members of the group. But the recording of the show was terrific.

Best show the band ever played: The Carnegie Arts Center Eyes and Ears show. We interpreted time-based visual scores in the form of video and film projections in a collaborative project set up by Joanna Racynska and Will Redman with the Carnegie Arts Center. Twelve filmmakers from WNY were commissioned to create these scores for our ensemble, and the installation was set up in the gallery for the month of October 2005.

Anything else you would like our readers to know about the band? The Open Music Ensemble is supported by the Open Music Foundation, a not-for-profit organization for composers and artists dedicated to the promotion of artistic expression based on unconventional, experimental, open-form, and especially graphical, forms of communicating musical ideas. By this, we refer specifically to music that explores the relationship between the visual and the musical: how new forms of visual expression on the page can lead to previously-unknown forms of musical expression.

Contact information: Contact us through mail at 453 Auburn Ave. Floor 2 Buffalo, NY 14213 or via e-mail omf.dirs@openmusic.us

To respond to this article, e-mail editorial@artvoice.com or write to: Artvoice, 810 Main St., Buffalo, NY 14202

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