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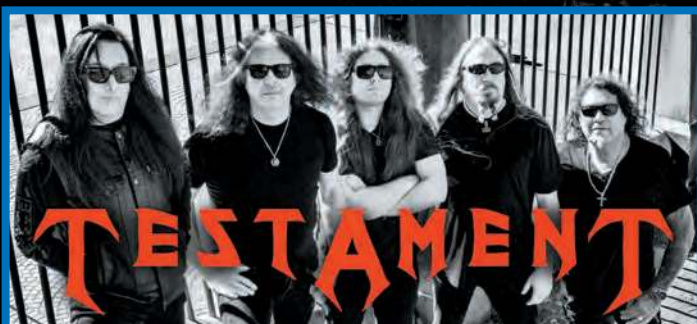
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And many
more!



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utter sincerity it just gives me the giggles. I honesty wasn't sure what to expect from 'The Greatest Gift of All', and indeed was preparing the special acid based ink to slag it off. In the end, though, I enjoyed this far more than I should, with the new tracks really sparkling, celebratory without sacrificing the Stryper sound in any way. A decent Christmas album? Praise the lord!

Alan Holloway

**SUEDE
'ANTIDEPRESSANTS'
(BMG)
ROCK**

As the whole world and their dog seem to have been banging on about a certain band of brothers from Manchester for the last year or so, down south, their peers from London just get on with the business of still creating albums of an alarmingly high quality over thirty years after releasing their chart-topping debut album.

Suede have always stood apart from those in the Brit Pop pack with whom they have annoyingly been lumped in, possessing a style and swagger absent from most of their contemporaries, not to mention their not-so-secret weapon in lead singer Brett Anderson, who possesses one of the finest voices of his generation.

'Antidepressants' is Suede's tenth album and ninth to crash into the UK Top 10, with only 2002's 'A New Morning' failing to make it that far. Suede certainly seems to be on something of a run of form of late, with 'The Blue Hour' and 'Autofiction' being particularly strong releases. 'Antidepressants' certainly continues that trend, but if anything goes up a notch.

Opener 'Disintegrate' is classic Suede with its up-tempo beat and dark guitars, with Brett Anderson's superlative, passionate vocals just soaring at the chorus. 'Dancing With Europeans' switches tempo but follows perfectly from 'Disintegrate', making them two natural show openers, while the title-track tips its hat towards prime-time The Cure, which is no bad thing.

The dark Gothic melancholia of 'The Sound And The Summer', with its chiming guitar, harks back to the glory days of the Death Cult and guitarist Richard Oakes really pulls the atmospherics out of the bag here, beautifully complimenting Anderson's emotive vocals. Quite, quite brilliant.

The bubbling bass line on 'Trance State' and swirling guitars combined with Anderson's passionate vocals provide one of the many high points towards the end of the album. Few bands can match

Suede on such beautiful melancholic, minor key songs like this. Anderson's vocals throughout are classy, emotional and so melodic that even those not usually into the Brit Pop/Indie scene would take something from this album.

Suede may well be an unusual band to feature within these pages, but the soaring melodies, impassioned vocals and intriguing guitar work, not to mention a varied and moody collection of songs, make 'Antidepressants' an album the more adventurous should investigate.

Mick Burgess

**TAILGUNNER
'MIDNIGHT BLITZ'
(Napalm)
HEAVY METAL**

Tailgunner, the Portsmouth-based five-piece, are flying the flag for old-school British Heavy Metal. If your playlists feature Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Saxon, Primal Fear or Helloween, 'Midnight Blitz' will feel instantly familiar – and thrillingly fresh. The band comprises Tom Hewson (bass), Craig Cairns (vocals), Zach Salvini and Rhea Thompson (guitars), and Eddie Mariotti (drums). Despite their youth, Tailgunner's sound is remarkably polished, melodic and self-assured.

Produced by the legendary KK Downing (KK's Priest/Judas Priest), the album boasts a slick yet powerful mix that captures the spirit of Traditional Metal while keeping things crisp and modern. Even for listeners who don't normally gravitate toward Trad Metal, 'Midnight Blitz' is hard to resist. If the band can maintain this level of quality, their future looks exceptionally bright.

Frontman Cairns bridges the gap between Traditional and Power Metal vocalists with a commanding yet controlled performance. His voice is rich and expressive without veering into excess – a balance many seasoned singers never master. Guitarists Thompson and Salvini deliver a formidable twin-guitar attack, their interplay razor sharp and full of character. Holding it all together, Hewson and Mariotti form a rhythm section as tight as it is thunderous. Together, they sound like a band far beyond their years.

The album opens with the explosive title-track, a statement of intent that sets the tone for what follows. 'Tears In Rain' ups the ante with soaring melodies, while 'Follow Me In Death' channels the galloping energy of classic Maiden. 'Dead Until Dark' and 'Barren Lands And Seas Of Red' showcase the band's flair for the epic, the latter standing as a clear highlight. The slow burning 'War In Heaven' contrasts beautifully with the fierce punch of 'Blood Sacrifice'.

SOEN – 'RELIANCE' (Silver Lining)

PROGRESSIVE



Soen continue to enhance their musical legacy with their seventh album since their formation in 2010. Their template is well established by now, forging ahead in finding new directions in which to explore the contrasts between light and dark, loud and calm, and heavy and soothing. Despite their Prog Metal credentials, there's a pleasing lack of the temptation to indulge in overblown and protracted epics that are often associated with the genre.

There's also an intelligent insight into the emotions as they delve into the human mind, heart and soul with what they call "a visionary duty of care, plus an extra edge of heavy." That sees them skirting around the mental and physical boundaries which challenge humankind as it wrestles with itself in challenging times. Thoughtful, provocative and brutal, 'Reliance' is a modern-day musical treatise.

Remaining firmly rooted in short(er) sharp bursts, heavy and straight to the point, their intentions are clear from the evidence of opening cut and first single, 'Primal'. The disparity of the strident march of a hugely dense riff and the lushness of the melodic hook is matched blow-by-blow by ten tracks where the heaviness retains its intent without becoming a thing of challenge, which so often provides the obstacle in Prog Metal. 'Mercenary' follows suit with a similarly intense depth charge coming from the rhythm section, yet tempered yet again with an opulent melody that emphasises the album's focus on unbound and raw energy, yet with a significant helping of light and hope.

The inspiration to find the fire and step out of the darkness is driven home with genuine fervour, accompanied by crushing rhythms, organic electronic textures, and the occasional rather than expected, fiery solo (check the killer leads in 'Huntress' and 'Axis'). All the way to 'Draconian' (one of a couple of tracks that nudge into power balladeering) there's an impressive commitment to those jolting tempos and alluring, sometimes dreamily subtle melodies – 'Huntress' a guilty party here. 'Indifferent' changes the tone for a brief while – piano, a burst of clean jazzy guitar and a softer emotive vocal offering an alternative texture – while 'Vellichor' an atmospheric closer; mention of "the gallows" is accompanied by an ominous tolling, as it heads towards the sort of controlled crescendo that achieves fulfilling closure.

The beauty of 'Reliance' though is in its immediacy giving a lasting impression of Soen's most accessible album to date.

Mike Ainscoe

Later, the galloping 'Night Raids' and the defiantly melodic 'Eye Of The Storm' keep the energy high before closer 'Eulogy' ends proceedings in grand, majestic style. 'Midnight Blitz' is an electrifying record from a band with both reverence for Metal's roots and the drive to forge their own legacy. Tailgunner aren't just paying tribute – they're blazing their own trail. So, raise your horns... and scream for me!

Chris O'Connor

**THE DEAD COWBOYS
'THE DEAD COWBOYS'
(BraveWords)
SOUTHERN/COUNTRY/FOLK**

The tagline that accompanies the promotional info with this album states, "What would it sound like if KISS releases a Country album?" Err.. nothing like this! The Dead Cowboys were formed by singer/guitarist Bobby Jensen who was previously in a band called Hairball (no, me neither) as well as KISS tributes Strutter and KISS ARMY. Attempting to blend his love of all things Simmons/Stanley, etc. with an upbringing listening to Waylon Jennings has resulted in this debut album, but KISS playing Country it certainly is not.

There are plenty of artists out there who successfully blend Rock with Country (Cory Marks, Jacob Bryant, Nate Smith and Kolby Cooper are just four that float my boat regularly, not to mention Jelly Roll and Hardy who are very successfully reinventing the scene), but The Dead Cowboys fall slightly short of achieving their aim. Trying to incorporate old-style, Hillbilly-esque Rebel Country abundant with traditional instruments like pedal steel guitar and fiddles with Rock 'n' Roll rhythms, while incorporating a brass section or Wild West feel (they've dubbed their sound "Heavy Western"), too often comes across as trying to throw too much into the mix, while the occasional cross lyrics certainly don't help the issue.

Some if it is tolerable, like the rollicking 'Mexico' and 'When The Cows Come

Home', and the traditional Country ballad 'Jensen Road', while the heavy rocker 'Demon Desperado' would be enjoyable if not for the Wild West stylings. However, when the quality dips then so does the listenability, such as 'Bad Friends And Good Times', 'Super Country Cowboy' and the frankly awful 'Hot Rod Vega' – you thought 'Achy Breaky Heart' was naff, well it's like 'Stairway To Heaven' compared to this! The Countrified cover of The Osmonds' 'Crazy Horses' isn't great either, but at least they didn't include a KISS cover!

I appreciate that The Dead Cowboys have tried to do something slightly different here; however, too often I'm reminded of Hot Country Knights, but then remember they are actually a tongue-in-cheek parody band – and I know who I'd prefer to listen to. These Dead Cowboys won't need exhuming anytime soon.

Ant Heeks

**THE FOUNDATION
'RELATIONS'
(Symphonia)
PROGRESSIVE**

The Foundation is a Dutch Progressive band of some note, by all accounts, and founded by keyboardist Ron Lammers, with 'Relations' being their second album that builds on the themes that first appeared on their debut album 'Mask'.

This album certainly falls within the remit of what is usually termed as 'Neo-Prog', with melody being combined with grand, sweeping Symphonic statements, and on these terms this album can be deemed somewhat of a success. 'Alpha' which opens the album, is one such example with its grandiose keyboards being front and centre, yet retaining that all important accessibility. The instrumental 'Beauty Of Nature' is almost pastoral in nature and is the perfect foil for the overblown opener, yet nevertheless still as effective.

'Backbone' is at times bombastic

SLASH – 'LIVE AT THE S.E.R.P.E.N.T. FESTIVAL' (earMusic)

BLUES



Having been turned on to the Blues as a young teenager via his grandmother playing BB King records to him, Slash has repaid his musical debt to this cornerstone genre many times over the years. He does so again on this searing live recording from his curated S.E.R.P.E.N.T. Festival (Solidarity, Engagement, Restore, Peace, Equality N' Tolerance).

This chosen collection of Blues cover tunes have a deep connection to Slash, mostly being the tracks he grew up with, alongside early Aerosmith and AC/DC, as he developed his own guitar style. There are fifteen cuts, including a core of songs from his recent 'Orgy Of The Damned' studio record, with 'Parchman Farm Blues', 'Red House', 'Stone Free', 'Big Legged Woman', 'Shake Your Money Maker', plus 'It Takes A Lot To Laugh, It Takes A Train To Cry' being new to this album, throughout which Tash Neal excels on vocals.

Slash's Hard Rock guitar is tempered into a Blues Rock approach which he particularly nails on 'The Pusher' and 'Born Under A Bad Sign'. Then again, he nails every part on this lightly mixed board recording that authentically allows what was played and heard on the night shine hard. Check out 'Oh, Well' for further 110% proof of this. 'Live At The Serpent Festival' is a stinging set of songs given the venomous Slash treatment.

Paul Davies

and at others serene and delicate, and conjures up images of the likes of those classic bands such as Styx and Kansas, so it can't be bad, eh? 'Ses Lunettes Noire' is the album's customary power ballad, and the usual terms such as "Majestic" and "Stately" can be applied quite liberally here. 'Intense' is another exemplary exercise in how the band utilise their many talents with a super slice of Melodic Prog, whereas 'Rubberband', being the longest track on show, is a multi-part epic with many layers to it, but always staying very focussed. 'Life' is a more thoughtful piece with more than a hint of Steve Hackett's solo work to it, and the album finishes on an optimistic note with the impressive 'Omega', which picks up where opener 'Alpha' left off and is supremely magnificent.

There is, of course, a theme running throughout the album (well it wouldn't be Prog without it would it?) which highlights Lammers' spiritual awakening and the various aspects of how he deals with relationships, not only with family but also with God, and its thematic content is, I'm sure, something that most of us will be able relate to.

Any discerning fan of Melodic Prog will no doubt want to hear this, as it really does tick every single box of this particular genre. This is an all-round excellent release, and worthy of much attention.

Malcolm Smith

**THE HARA
'THE FALLOUT'
(Masco)
MODERN/ALTERNATIVE**

The third studio album from Manchester UK trio The Hara lands with the force of a well-aimed sledgehammer and the finesse of a band that clearly knows its way around the Alternative/Nu-Metal toolkit. Josh Taylor (vocals), Jack Kennedy (drums) and Zack Breen (guitars) compose twelve tightly wound tracks centered on mental health, culminating in a cathartic, high-octane experience that is as emotionally raw as it is sonically buffed.

While the album isn't exactly reinventing the genre, it certainly keeps its momentum going with admirable velocity.

The lead single 'Easier To Die' sets the tone with its punch-to-the-gut production and unflinching lyrical urgency. Taylor's vocal performance is a standout; elastic, emotive, and sharp enough to cut through walls of guitar distortion without losing its sense of vulnerability. Breen's riffing is appropriately muscular, often evoking the tight-rope tension of Deftones or the brooding drama of Linkin Park. Kennedy's drumming is all controlled chaos, providing the kind of rhythmic propulsion that turns introspection into something anthemic.

If all of this sounds familiar, well... it is. The Hara wear their influences openly, and 'The Fallout' frequently pays homage to the genre's titans; one can't help but hear echoes of Korn's single 'Freak On A Leash' or the cinematic bombast of Skillet woven into the mix. For listeners hungry for innovation, this album may feel more like déjà vu than revelation. The band's sonic palette, while undeniably polished, leans heavily into established formulas, and the relatively short song lengths rarely give ideas room to evolve into something distinctly The Hara's own.

However, dismissing 'The Fallout' on originality alone would be missing the forest for the flaming, angst-lit trees. The album's immediacy is part of its charm. The trio's visceral fervour gives even the most familiar structures a renewed sense of urgency. The album's thematic consistency by unpacking anxiety, despair, and the search for resilience feels strikingly relevant in 2025's cultural climate.

While the album can feel somewhat faceless from track to track, the overall experience is cohesive, intense and surprisingly accessible. The Hara may not be reshaping the Alternative/Nu-Metal landscape here, but they've crafted a solid, emotionally-charged record that will resonate with fans of the genre. 'The Fallout' doesn't break new ground, but it certainly shakes the ground it stands on

SPOCK'S BEARD – 'THE ARCHAEOPTIMIST' (Madfish) PROGRESSIVE



I probably speak for many fans who feared the band were finished when it went quiet after 2018's 'Noise Floor' album with members switching to Pattern-Seeking Animals. Their UK tour in 2024 felt like a swansong, but in a chat with Ted Leonard after the London show he intimated these gigs had provided fresh impetus and new material was a distinct possibility.

There's a change, long-time collaborator John Boegehold is no longer involved and keyboardist Ryo Okumoto has teamed up with Michael Whiteman (I Am The Manic Whale) as the creative

hub. Six tracks provide over an hour of quality entertainment. Okumoto is a maverick and extrovert so there are some distinctly over the top moments where he indulges himself a little too much, bringing elements of their live shows to the album. Fortunately, these are in the minority, these excerpts aside this is another great set of songs.

'Invisible' opens brilliantly with just vocals, putting me in mind of Kansas, before the instruments kick in heavily which is redolent of early Spock's. There's some fine synth and Hammond moments and a distinctly retro synth solo. Melody shines through and the chorus is catchy. 'Electric Monk' quickly develops into a delicious melody. A mid track switch to a mellow/slower section with another terrific melody is a case of inspired songwriting.

Across their career the band has been known for their expertise at a cappella, starting with 'Thoughts' on their sophomore album. Here we get 'Afourthoughts', this being the fourth iteration, which borrows its opening from the aforementioned track. Aside from the a cappella section, the vocal arrangement across the song is brilliant, although it does open with one of those "Ryo" moments, but also features a delightful piano solo.

'St. Jerome In The Wilderness' begins with a typical SB staccato motif, again the melodies are terrific as is the piano solo, unfortunately the instrumental section features some disappointingly tuneless soloing. The title track is a twenty-minute epic and as such moves through a variety of phases, including a Prog Metal section; however, it all ties together nicely.

'Next Step' features more delightful piano on the verses and the chorus has a bit of that Kansas vibe again. Another mid song switch to a quieter passage is delicious. The synth solo brings Genesis to mind.

A top notch and very welcome return to action.

Gary Marshall

and for many listeners, that will be more than enough.

Brent Rusche

**THE ONE
'LIGHTER THAN AIR'
(Construction)
PROGRESSIVE**

The info accompanying this release proudly announces that 'Lighter Than Air' is a Symphonic Rock album for fans of Marillion. I am not hugely familiar with all things Marillion, but what I can tell you is that this is the second release from The One and the follow-up to their debut 'Sunrise', which came out in 2023. They are a six-piece Dutch band, but contain three English musicians as well as three from The Netherlands.

Apparently, the debut had strong English Progressive Rock influences from the likes of Genesis, King Crimson and Yes. This is still evident throughout this album, particularly on the song 'South Of Cookham Wood'. This kicks off with some atmospheric flute playing, before developing into a strong, melodic Progressive Rock track, containing some lovely interplay between lead guitarist Edwin in't Veld and keyboard player Ron Mozer. Overall, there is a more contemporary feel to their music, however what struck me immediately were the vocals of lead singer Max Gilkes. This guy is a dead ringer vocally to P.J. Olsson of Alan Parsons Band and for me that is no bad thing.

The album is bookended by its two strongest tracks. Opener 'Lighter Than Air' and final song 'The Beautiful Lie' are both powerful and multi-layered, with heavy yet melodic lead guitar work. Gilkes' vocals are particularly noticeable here and fit perfectly with the music. I wasn't so keen on the songs with spoken vocals, such as 'Paint It Red', 'Wolf' and 'How A Shadow Feels'. The last one particularly was powerful, awash with adventurous rhythms, but felt disjointed with the

inclusion of these spoken vocals. In saying that, all eight tracks provided moments of interest and enjoyment, with the quality of the musicians never in doubt.

In summary, I enjoyed most of 'Lighter Than Air' and would certainly recommend it to fans of the bands mentioned above.

Robin McGhie

**THE RODS
'WILD DOGS UNCHAINED'
(Massacre)
HEAVY METAL**

An old-school US Metal trio that made quite a lot of noise (excuse the pun) in the early eighties, Cortland based The Rods' biggest initial claim to fame was that guitarist/vocalist David "Rock" Feinstein had played in Elf with his cousin Ronnie James Dio.

They released debut album 'Rock Hard' independently in 1980 – this was reissued as simply 'The Rods' the following year when they signed to Arista – and their European profile got a hefty boost when they supported Iron Maiden on 1982's era-defining 'Beast On The Road' tour. Unfortunately, things sort of drifted after that and the band split after the disappointing 'Heavier Than Thou' in 1986. Skip forward twenty or so years and an on/off reunion of sorts has resulted in a further three studio albums – 'Vengeance' (2011), 'Brotherhood Of Metal' (2019) and last year's 'Rattle The Cage' – all of which are worth checking out.

And so, as 2025 draws to a close The Rods unleash their latest studio album (their ninth if memory serves) 'Wild Dogs Unchained', an album which I have to confess surprised me (pleasantly I might add). Only Feinstein and drummer Carl Canedy remain from the eighties band, but bassist Freddy Villano (who replaced original bassist Garry Bordonaro when he retired in 2019) steps up to the plate admirably once again.

I'll start with 'Hurricane' which closes out the show as this kinda typifies what

SOHO DUKES - 'NIGHTHAWKS, ACROBATS, AND EVERYTHING UNDER THE MOON' (Cargo) ROCK



One of the great things about reviewing music is that no matter how many years you have been following or writing about music, there is always something new to discover and enjoy. So it is with this album by the Soho Dukes. This is their third album after two independent releases in 2021 and 2024, and is their best yet, in terms of both musical content and songwriting.

The band has been making music since 2017 and consists of Johnny Barracuda (vocals/harmonica), Si Leach (lead guitar), Col "The Duke" Foster (rhythm guitar), Bomber (bass), Swerve (keys) and

Ge Blackwell (drums). On this album, they are joined by guest musicians Spike from The Quireboys on vocals and Dave "Bucket" Colwell on guitar.

Every song is chock full of memorable hooks, zippy, apposite guitar solos and, often, some wonderful saxophone from Toronto-based Simon Wallis, who adds welcome colour on several tracks. Their sound is resonant of Mott The Hoople, Madness (yes, really...) and The Small Faces, but with a collective sound all their own.

Special mention must go to the consistently witty lyrics, which not only raise a wry smile but also almost always rhyme – a massively underrated skill in my opinion. Blank verse is easy! These lyrics are clever, amusing and often poignant – never more so than on the Spike-lead slow number 'A Stone's Throw Away', which is the longest song on the album but one of its best.

Elsewhere, 'Elaine' is a piano-driven stomper that, like so many here, can be sung after one listen, and any song that contains the words "what she sees in Pasternak I will never understand" must be given the thumbs up!

There is often a subtle, bittersweet melancholy running through these songs that gives them unexpected depth and emotional resonance, contrasting nicely with the playful, cheeky tone of the vocals and lyrics. A good example of this is the excellent 'Rain On Us', a tuneful, moving ditty which starts and ends with the repeated line "No one's gonna love me".

Every song here deserves repeated listening, and some of them are so dense with lyrics, such as the title-track and album opener a second listening is, in fact, essential to really be able to appreciate the work that has gone into them.

An unqualified success. Check it out as soon as you can.

Ross Sampson

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