

Reviews

Music

Tortoise & Bonnie “Prince” Billy, East West Blast Test, and Cunninlynguists

REVIEWS BY JESSICA HOPPER, MIA LILY CLARKE, AND KABIR HAMID



26

CUNNINLYNGUISTS

Art

“The Fluidity of Time” at the MCA

REVIEW BY KIM THERIAULT

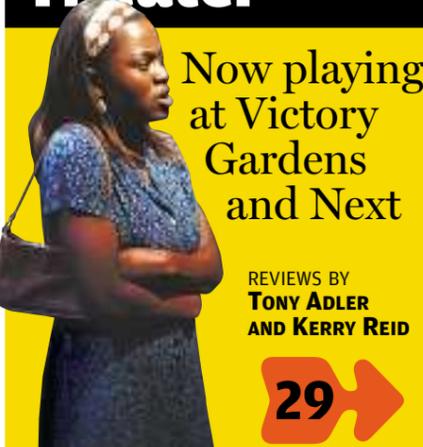


28

Theater

Now playing at Victory Gardens and Next

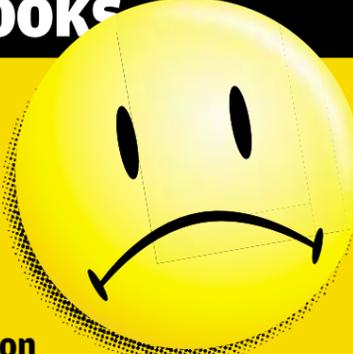
REVIEWS BY TONY ADLER AND KERRY REID



29

LIZ LAUREN

Books



Two on Wal-Mart

REVIEW BY CHRIS BARSANTI

33

Music

TORTOISE & BONNIE “PRINCE” BILLY THE BRAVE AND THE BOLD (OVERCOAT)
EAST WEST BLAST TEST POPULAR MUSIC FOR UNPOPULAR PEOPLE (IPECAC)
CUNNINLYNGUISTS A PIECE OF STRANGE (LA UNDERGROUND/QN5)

Short Takes on Recent Releases

An ad hoc supergroup, archetypal Ipecac foolishness, and suddenly serious hip-hop from some southern jokers

TORTOISE & BONNIE “PRINCE” BILLY | *The Brave and the Bold*

Are you one of those Chicagoans who's never owned a record by Tortoise and still thinks of them as a “local band”? Have you seen Will Oldham only once, back in 1996 when he was still Palace, and did



you write him off for sounding too much like a yodeling hillbilly and then sleep on the zillion albums he's put out since then, ending up owning one of them only because someone left it at your house? If you answered yes to more than half these questions, we have a lot in common, you and I.

Since I'm not well versed in either artist's work and don't know which of their albums are iconic and which are near misses, I can't tell you that their new joint project, *The Brave and the Bold*, is “the most jamming shit since *TNT*” or “not as good as Oldham's collabo with Rian Murphy.” But because it's an all-covers album, what I can tell you is whether or not they do justice to the original versions—and the most I can say about that is “sometimes.”

Oldham is more a songwriter than a stylist, and would've been up a creek back when all most popular singers did was interpret other people's material. His undoing of Springsteen's “Thunder Road” makes you wish he'd left well enough alone—he sounds like he's reading the lyrics off a paper plate, singing about a savior rising from the streets the way you might sing about sandwiches or cabinetry. (Tortoise lays down a neat boogie underneath, though, so overall it's a draw.) With “It's Expected I'm Gone” the boys break the punk commandment of Thou Shalt Not Cover the Minutemen, turning the tune into a distorted stew of lead-footed, impatient-sounding stoner rock—the kind of shit that feels amazing to play when you're high on your own masterful riffing abilities and jamming at the end of band practice. It's hard to begrudge them for putting it to tape.

One spot where Oldham and Tortoise do justice is on their rendition of “Daniel,” an Elton John ballad of much sap and tenderness that they strip of its 70s theatricality and transform into a loping electro-dub meditation. Despite his limited vocal range, Oldham gets to the marrow of the song in a way that Elton never did with his tremulous, emotive sighs; laboring over overdriven drone, he sings in a burr that always gives out on him just before he reaches the high notes. And the versions of Richard Thompson's “Calvary Cross,” Lungfish's “Love Is Love,” and Ronaldo Bastos and Milton Nascimento's “Cravo e Canela” are

assertive and confident—instead of a two-headed side project doing covers, Oldham and Tortoise sound like a real band getting comfortable within the skin of their own songs. —**Jessica Hopper**

EAST WEST BLAST TEST | *Popular Music for Unpopular People*

Noisy, brash, convoluted, and hyperactive, East West Blast Test's second album, *Popular Music for Unpopular People*, has found its ideal home on Mike Patton's Ipecac label. The perverse influence of Patton projects like *Fantomas* and *Mr. Bungle* is like a pervasive infection in the duo's mostly instrumental hardcore, with its indecipherable samples, fractured rhythmic chords, and



ambitious, genre-scrabbling approach to composition.

East West Blast Test started out more than five years ago as a casual experiment between New Jersey-based drummer Dave Witte (Phantomsmasher, Melt-Banana, Municipal Waste) and LA-based guitarist and bassist Chris Dodge (Spazz, Duh, Burn Your Bridges).

Their collaboration began when Witte mailed Dodge some drum parts he'd recorded, inviting him to add whatever he wanted. The tape-trading approach they've since evolved is the nucleus of East West Blast Test's creativity—they owe at least some of their success to the fact that they don't actually play together. Though they can't benefit from the sort of real-time, in-person reaction and counterreaction that's at the heart of improvisation, like all good improvisers they provoke each other to go beyond habit. Because they present each other with already recorded material, they're forced to fit their experimentations into fairly concrete structures—their transcontinental music-making method is like stop-motion improvisation, with all the provocations premeditated.

One of the most appealing aspects of the result is its lively, almost ferocious, dismissal of genre limitations. The music is a cacophony of metal, hardcore, jazz, cabaret, and ethnic styles from Indian to African to Australian aboriginal, augmented by multiple guest vocalists, organ, didgeridoo, and saxophone (from Yakuza's Bruce Lamont). The tracks are segments more than songs—23 of them hustle past in less than 33 minutes, sometimes jumping from genre to genre, sometimes fusing two or three into a strange chimera.

Dodge's default guitar sound is dry, compressed, and dissonant, recalling abrasive mid-90s Skin Graft bands like Yona-Kit, but despite leaning heavily on that dated and derivative style, he and

Witte take a lot of risks. As a result *Popular Music for Unpopular People* has its share of tedious misfires between the brilliant experiments: “In the Multi-Purpose Room” is little more than pitch-shifted excerpts from a language-instruction tape, but standout tunes like “Chasing the Dragon” and “Corkmaster” bristle with shimmering trails of power chords and delightfully tight flurries of drums. The band's hit-or-miss eclecticism seems to arise organically from Witte and Dodge's urge to process the musical ideas they've accumulated over the course of their careers—not from a desire to puff up their feathers and make a show of their versatility. —**Mia Lily Clarke**

CUNNINLYNGUISTS | *A Piece of Strange*

The Cunninlynguists' first two albums, *Will Rap for Food* (2001) and *Southernunderground* (2003), mixed gleeful jackassery, tragicomic self-deprecation, and epic pathos. But with the new *A Piece of Strange* they've crafted a serious, unified piece of music, something to listen to when you're in a melancholy mood—or want to be put in one.

On *Southernunderground's* “Old School,” the core duo of Kno and Deacon the Villain reimagined historical figures from Jesus to Einstein as hip-hop hooligans (“When lightning struck Ben Frank's kite and sent currents through / He was the first to electric boogaloo”), but there's no such silliness on the new disc. Of all the

MCs in the group, Kno was the best at goofing off, his good-natured clownishness his biggest strength—but he contributes only a single verse to *A Piece of Strange*.

Kno more than makes up for his absence on the mike, though, with his incredible presence behind the boards. I don't know why he isn't getting tapped on the shoulder every three seconds by another MC looking to collaborate—he could easily hold his own alongside big-name indie producers like 9th Wonder and Danger Mouse. On *A Piece of Strange* he's at the height of his powers, his signature style fully formed: chipmunk sped-up samples (a trick he's been using at least as long as Kanye), twangy guitars, wailing horns, haunting vocals, and sometimes propulsive, sometimes doleful piano, all draped over sturdy, understated beats. It's a lush and tempestuous wash of sound that recalls the dark atmosphere of OutKast's *ATLiens*.

For a third of the album nobody raps—there's either singing or no vocals at all. It's as though Kno has decided to speak through the music. Deacon and newcomer Natti, who replaces Mr. SOS, align themselves with his introspective production, applying their southern twang and urgent delivery to purposeful rhymes about big subjects—the idylls of youth, the plague of racism, the nefariousness of the State Department, and of course the irresistible charms of their favorite green weed, a beautiful woman they make love to with every puff.

The penultimate tune, "What'll



You Do?," is a sad song without a trace of the sappiness that ruins boo-hoo numbers like DMX's "Slippin'." Deacon sounds genuine and down-to-earth as he describes his frustration with life as a broke MC: "But needs outweigh cheese, tryin' to stay in contention / 'For the love' is a hard reason to keep my life in suspension." *A Piece of Strange* is hardly a fun record, but it's grown-up, cohesive, and powerful—overall a pretty good trade-off. —Kabir Hamid

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