

LEFT OF THE DIAL



Bernard Fanning
Tea & Sympathy
(Lost Highway)

In America, Bernard Fanning's band Powderfinger is unlikely to merit a nod of recognition from even a fairly knowledgeable music fan. In Australia, however, they are superstars: the preeminent voice of rock with a 10-year career and slew of platinum records at home. Okay, so the guy has earned his shot at the obligatory, "do his own thing" solo album. So to step away from Powderfinger's populist, thinking man's rock—they've been called Oz's cross of Radiohead, Pearl Jam and U2—was to make a blues-infused country rock record. Imbibing Jimmy Page's open tunings, 1970s Laurel Canyon and Gillian Welch and David Rawlings, *Tea & Sympathy* is more than just an exercise in Fanning doing a half-assed take of Powderfinger on his own. Truthfully, I was a little suspicious that Lost Highway was putting out this record and figured it had to be chalked up to the fact that Fanning's band is an incredible cash cow for the label's parent company, Universal Music. This had to be a sort of glad-hand to him. Giving it a fair listen, however, this thoughtful, well-delivered collection of songs is a natural fit in the home of Lucinda Williams and Ryan Adams. Fanning's earthy voice lends his songs all the lived-in honesty that they need. The warm but intricate ballad "The Thrill Is Gone" bears the Zep influence but siphons it through Jackson Browne. Fanning's narrator isn't glum in this song of grief and seemingly accepts the mistakes he's made with a smile. It's got a great fiddle part at the end, too. Neil Young chord changes and hard-blown harmonica are borrowed for "Not Finished Yet." The laidback, playful pop of "Sleeping Rough" has Fanning yearning a little carefree romance, asking, "Let's step out and have some fun/And tell each other some big lies." The delicate acoustic guitar and hushed harmonies of "Down to the River" give it a haunted hymn quality until it curves momentarily into a fiery bolster. After fully taking in this solid and enjoyable first solo outing, I've got to admit that Fanning could give up his day job and I wouldn't mind a bit.

—donny kutzbach



Peaches
Impeach My Bush
(XL Recordings)

Until now, the name Peaches made me think of the character Heavy D played in *The Cider House Rules*. Good old Heavy gave us a reprieve from Tobey Maguire's insufferable prepubescence and Charlize Theron's general horridness, allowing us to reminisce about him and his rag-tag group of Boyz. O, the mischief those lovable rascallions would get into! These days, Peaches is the alter ego of a different kind of schlockmeister: Canadian rocker/rapper/musical smut peddler Merrill Nisker. On her third record, *Impeach My Bush* (a brilliant album title if there ever was one), Peaches continues to dish out her contrived mix of sound-alike electronic beats and the occasional rudimentary classic rock riff, all driven by the blatant sexual explicitness of her lyrics. There's no such thing as innuendo here, and if songs like "Slippery Dick" and "Tent in Your Pants" aren't meant to make you laugh, then I really don't see the point. Thankfully, it seems pretty obvious that humor is the goal here, from the album and song titles to the close-up spandex crotch shot of the back cover. And I'll take the sarcastically slutty antiwar sentiments of the opening track over anything that farty old Bruce Springsteen has to say: "I'd rather fuck who I want than kill who I am told to/Let's face it, we all want tush/If I'm wrong, impeach my bush." Nisker's heart is in the right place with this attempt at tongue-in-cheek vulgarity, but it's still just an attempt. It's hard to ignore the uninspired, interchangeable beats, and Peaches' talents as a rapper and singer are fair-to-middling. Her bizarre fusion of Lil' Kim, Joan Jett and Andrew Dice Clay seems funny on paper and is certainly unique, but in the end, it's good for nothing more than a chuckle or two—unless you feel like giving your grandmother a heart attack.

—joe sweeney

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