

POLICA + STARGAZE Music For The Long Emergency

TRANSGRESSIVE

8/10

Minneapolis electronica
quintet collaborate with
chamber orchestra



Minneapolis quintet Polica's gothic electronica resembles a chromium-plated Portishead, and here the Berlin-based

chamber orchestra Stargaze—in an ongoing partnership that follows a 2016 Steve Reich collaboration—don't alter this USP. Instead Stargaze use sparing woodwind and string flourishes to add emotional heft to the woozy, slo-mo soul of "Fake Like" or the industrial judders of "Cursed". The moral centrepiece of the album appears to be "How Is This Happening", a dumbstruck response to Trump's election victory, where vocalist Channy Leaneagh's folksy mantra ("resisting him/resisting us") is set against spectral strings and woodwind. Icily brilliant.

JOHN LEWIS

PSYCHIC MARKERS Hardly Strangers

BELLA UNION

7/10

London psych band find some
novel directions



The six-minute title track of Psychic Markers' second album, "Hardly Strangers" lays out one of several sonic

templates for the London quintet populated by past and present members of My Sad Captains, Great Ytene, Still Corners and Grass House. While the machine-made pulse and texture suggest the influence of Kraftwerk and Cluster, traces of the Radiophonic fixations of Broadcast and Ghost Box are just as discernible amid the band's shimmering brand of psych. And while the detour into

shoegaze doo-wop on "Dreaming" isn't as bracing as the hazed-out Hawkwind of "The Moon Sits In Lonely Places" or the motorik menace of "Sea Waves", there's still an impressive degree of novelty in Psychic Markers' heady explorations.

JASON ANDERSON

MATTHEW ROBB Spirit In The Form

WABI SABI

7/10

British Americana from Cologne



Robb, a British songwriter based in Cologne, where he lives with his family in a home made of reclaimed material,

likes to ramble. Before settling in Germany, he lived in the Andes and the Rockies. Musically, he occupies the borderline between the talking blues of Townes Van Zandt and the folk excursions of early Dylan. Robb calls it "song-poetry", and while the title track and the devilish "Slave Song" underscore Robb's familiarity with the Texas-narrative tradition, the album's melancholy closer, "Blood On The Pillow", is a beautifully weighted meditation on death which transcends its generic architecture.

ALASTAIR MCKAY

BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE Medicine Songs

TRUE NORTH

7/10

New medicine in old bottles from
folk veteran



There are few more gratuitous exercises than artists re-recording their classics, but at 76, Buffy Sainte-Marie

has not only earned the right but pulls it off in a way that breathes new life into past glories. Not that songs such as "Soldier Blue" and "Universal Soldier" (which she wrote way back in 1961) need much updating, for their message remains

chillingly contemporary. There are compelling new compositions, too, including "You Got To Run (Spirit Of The Wind)", recorded with the brilliant Canadian indigenous singer Tanya Tagaq, and "The War Racket", a potent modern protest song.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON

SIMPLE MINDS Walk Between Worlds

BMG

7/10

Further signs of life from Kerr and co



Enjoying something of a late career renaissance, Simple Minds' first album of new material since 2014's *Big Music* is an

expansive, atmospheric reboot of the muscular melancholy of 1985's *Once Upon A Time* ("Sense Of Discovery", a lovely fin de siècle electro-ballad, even reprises the vocal refrain from "Alive And Kicking"). "The Signal And The Noise" and "In Dreams" possess a familiar restless propulsion, while the epic stir of "Barrowland Star", bolstered by a fine arabesque string arrangement and a searing guitar solo, is as strangely compelling as anything they've done over the past 35 years.

GRAEME THOMSON

THE SKULL DEFEKTS The Skull Defekts

THRILL JOCKEY

6/10

Noise-rock gang's concluding
curate's egg



Something doesn't quite add up about *The Skull Defekts*, the Swedish group's final album. "A Brief History Of Rhythm,

Dub, Life & Death" starts things strikingly, an anxious, panoramic slab of unrelenting, criss-crossing rhythms and brutish, tyre-squeal noise. But they struggle to reach this high point again, maybe as regulars Jean-Louis Huhta and Daniel Higgs are out of the picture this time. Many songs sit uncomfortably in their own skins, and at times the portentousness of the delivery becomes claustrophobic. Some good, powerful rock songs aside, this is a strange, honest, but not altogether convincing way to go out.

JON DALE

BETTE SMITH Jetlagger

BIG LEGAL MESS/FAT PUMPS

7/10

Big-voiced New Yorker heads
down South to find her soul



After years lost to a nine-to-five day job, Smith's belated debut taps exquisitely into vintage Southern soul with a voice as huge as her Angela Davis afro and a raunchy rasp and scrape that channels Mavis Staples, Etta James and Macy

Gray with a beseeching gospel fervour befitting her church upbringing as a Seventh Day Adventist. Mixing driving horns with psych guitar wigs-outs, the band chug like Creedence jamming with Booker T & The MG's, providing a groove-filled soundbed for Smith's swaggering, outsize voice on a set that mixes new compositions with delicious covers of classics by Isaac Hayes and the Staple Singers.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON



THE SOFT MOON Criminal

SACRED BONES

7/10

Malevolent, gangster grooves
on post-punker's fourth



Fuelled by a Catholic guilt no doubt intensified by his move from America's West Coast to Italy, Criminal finds Luis

Vasquez battling demons. Beginning with the caustic "Burn" and a guiding mantra—"I can't control myself!"—its titles regularly confirm his mood, with "The Pain" its brittle rhythms recalling late Disco Inferno's claustrophobia and "ILL" a mess of synths wailing and trumpeting like panicked elephants. "Young" offers brief flashes of a youthful Cure, but the fuzzy "Choke", about cocaine abuse, is underpinned by a malignant industrial beat, and the dominant mood remains that of an emaciated, homicidal Gary Numan.

WYNDHAM WALLACE

SUPERCHUNK What A Time To Be Alive

MERGE

8/10

Veteran US indie act get really riled



Superchunk's 11th studio record has all the hallmarks of a Superchunk album: clever and incisive lyrics, bouncy

rhythms, gnarly guitars, endlessly catchy hooks delivered in Mac McCaughan's reedy voice. But this time through, every single note is animated by the band's social and political outrage. "The scum, the same, the fucking lies," McCaughan shouts on the title track. "Oh, what a time to be alive!" It's their angriest, jitteriest and most aggressive album since their early-'90s heyday, and on "Reagan Youth" and "All For You" (with its hostile chorus, "Fight me!") Superchunk sound like a hardcore band half their age.

STEPHEN DEUSNER



Emergency
meeting:
Polica +
Stargaze