

Soundcheck A-Z

This month's selected CDs, vinyl and downloads

Acción Y Percepción Sonora

Various

Carbonproyecto DL

Like a 21st century alchemist, producer Fabian Racca pours a variety of exotic ingredients into the alembic of *Acción Y Percepción Sonora* (*Sound Action And Perception*) and a scene seems to crystallise. Racca runs his Carbonproyecto netlabel from La Pampa province, a long trek west from Buenos Aires; but the contributors to this freely downloadable compilation of Argentinian experimentalism cover a wide expanse of ground, musically and geographically. Racca's self-imposed brief was to bring together valuable instances of Argentinian sound art, exploratory and improvised music. Stylistically the collection encompasses Noise, avant rock, Ambient soundscapes, free jazz, musique concrète and much else besides.

The mysterious audio scrawl of Juan Manuel Castrillo's "Marabunta" was made by poking a contact microphone into an anthill; Klub Der Klang's motoric minimalism sounds like a Neul record heard through a neighbour's wall. Sound nihilist Tsiftsis wallows in bubbling electronic sludge, and Grupo Experimenta, using piano, percussion and prepared guitar improvise a setting for a poem by Victor Redondo. Sam Nacht blows a solo of rhythmic pops and clenched multiphonics on tenor sax, while Zypce layers fragments lifted from telephone conversations. Nearly three hours of material overall, and it's too diverse to summarize adequately, too varied in quality as well as in content to invite concise or meaningful judgement. But importantly it's out there and available. And hey presto, from the heart of the pampas Fabian Ricca has conjured up an Argentinian experimental music scene – a makeshift bracket, maybe, but useful and revealing.

Julian Cowley

Ariel Pink's Haunted Graffiti

Mature Themes

4AD CD/DL/LP

You can sit close to the speaker and still not decode it all: "A Kinski assassin blew a hole in my chest/Now I walk up out with the three bullet vest/A sea will be vessel for the sperm-headed brain/Mother twin genesis went down with plague." The very first song is a rampant word orgy of spies, double agents, shemales and onanists. "Suicide dumplings dropping testicle bombs," he deadpans, in character as hammy New Wave frontman. It's like Burrough's *Cities Of The Red Night* with all the ideology sucked out, leaving a pubescent wet dream of sexual ritual and international intrigue. *Mature Themes* in no way lives up to its title.

Getting a proper backing group for 2010's *Before Today* ironed out most of the kinks in Ariel Pink's music, with malleable four-track alchemy replaced by steady, predictable metre and sedate group interplay. The

pay-off with the follow-up *Mature Themes* is that all the kinky (Kinski?) stuff has been displaced to the lyrics, now an orgasmic explosion of desire, obsessions and fetishes.

The nostalgic aftertaste of the music is more pronounced than ever, with Ariel regurgitating fat chunks of Sparks, Devo, Duran Duran and Gary Numan. Sometimes, depending on your constitution, you can't help a gag reflex kicking in – "Symphony Of The Nympho" is a slack-jawed fantasy that attempts the kind of graceful and stealthy seduction of Roxy Music circa *Avalon*, a style which really only really works amid the more delineated sexual politics of the 1980s, or if you're lucky enough to be Bryan Ferry. "Only In My Dreams" is a brilliantly crafted piece of jangling Rickenbacker pop that sounds absurdly twee and easy in 2012.

But the music and the lyrics are knitted together more tightly here than *Before Today*. Rather than just jamming aimlessly away, the songs fold back neatly on themselves, with intricate organ and guitar cuticles at play while Ariel unpacks his lyrics. Ariel Pink's writing is completely scattergun, but this is what can make it so disarming. "Farewell American Primitive" is a song about slow genocide written from the perspective of an LA slacker, and lyrics such as "I'm here in spirit, so don't hesitate to write/Bitter and cold now, my thoughts make me sick at night" feel so close to home that they have a unexpectedly vicious gut punch.

Derek Walmsley

Azurazia

Lowering The Mediterranean, Irrigating The Sahara

Grautag DL/2×LP

It is the vanity of every age to consider how posterity will remember them. The Austro-Hungarian princes built confections of Greco-Roman ruins on their estates; the Victorians taunted themselves with paintings of London lying in future decay. Shelley quaked before the regal arrogance of Ozymandias's broken face and colossal monuments in his most famous poem, and today Hollywood moviemakers crush the American Dream with CGI tableaux of natural, unnatural and extraterrestrial calamities.

While artists have always been seduced by these images, the sound of fallen grandeur is less well explored. *Lower The Mediterranean, Irrigating The Sahara* shows it to be rich territory. Not that the power of the image is lost. Like previous Grautag releases it's a sumptuous gatefold sleeve put together by label boss Nicolas Moulin, with a giant pan-Arabian hero pointing out over a partial dam construction, a modern day Ozymandias raised up on oil and postcolonial treachery and broken by failed politics, corruption and humankind's eternal vanity. The whole project is presented as the first in a series of "original soundtracks produced for film which doesn't yet exist".

But the sounds evoke these sites in a way deeper and more unsettling than any image. The recordings open with a collaboration between French artist Pharaoh Chromium and Moulin. The keening of a muezzin is synthetically blended in an echo chamber on "Morning Sodium Azuramuezz". It becomes a pulsing tone both grandiose and hollow that merges into the awe-inspiring thrum of helicopter blades as modern machines descend, literal deus ex machina from false gods. Throughout, field recordings of desert sounds are abetted or melded into the clangs and crashes of industry.

The closing collaboration between Vincent Epplay and Arnaud Maguet pitches the rhythmic line of an oud against train tracks and tankers and the fizz of electrics before the side concludes with "Invocation Of My Terminal Beach Brother", a nod to JG Ballard's short story *The Terminal Beach*. Monuments that image alone would have left mute are given eerie and profound voice.

Nick Southgate

Ned Collette & Wirewalker

2

Fire CD/LP

Berlin based Australian songwriter Ned Collette has a background as an improviser, but his second album sees him honing a deceptively conventional approach to song. Recorded with drummer Joe Talia, 2 has Collette sketching out bare acoustic guitar outlines and offhand keyboard doodles, as well as delivering a sequence of smart, finely-observed lyrics with a sense of distance and perspective.

While his previous solo work has defaulted to the standard confessional singer/songwriter model, "Il Futuro Fantastico" piles on casually apocalyptic imagery with a wry confidence that recalls recent Nick Cave, another Australian who has excised past Gothic tendencies in favour of playful detachment. "Happy Heart" is like something by Michael Gira in Angels Of Light mode; simple, concise but dark and revelatory too. There are longueurs, however; both "The Hedonist" and "The Decision" approach the structural intelligence and ambiguous morality of Leonard Cohen – I'm tempted to suggest that they might be intended as parodies – but they are fatally undermined by some awkward phrasing and a vague hint of self-satisfaction.

Thankfully, the attractively diffident arrangements undercut any lingering sense of smugness. There are occasional moments of experimentation, such as the brief snatch of tape effects on "Il Futuro Fantastico" that would be interesting to see developed more fully within these intimate settings (perhaps along the lines pursued by 1990s folk-doncrète heroes Gastr Del Sol). For now, Collette's songs sound comfortable in their own skin, weightless, almost effortless. That might not necessarily be a good thing.

Keith Moliné

Deerhoof

Breakup Song

Polyvinyl CD/CS/DL/LP

When I heard that Deerhoof joined Flaming Lips onstage in Lawrence, Kansas to cover King Crimson's "21st Century Schizoid Man", I uncharitably thought that Yoshimi must have been busy (no doubt battling the pink robots elsewhere). But Deerhoof belonged there, and not just because The Lips edited the song much the way that The Hoof often assemble theirs – so that only the catchiest and the most chaotic parts are left. If *Breakup Song*'s big, slick production is anything to go by, Deerhoof yearn for the big stage. Like The B-52s before Ricky Wilson shuffled off his mortal coil, they have taken a stripped down sound, with elements of pop and the approachable avant garde, and blown every piece of it up to max size.

Because this is the 2000s, that big sound has a graininess that brings to mind a blown-up cell phone photo. But exaggeration can be good for hooks – here it ensures that the title tune's whumping drums and the crunchy guitars of "Zero Second Pause" impose themselves upon the senses. But it also contributes to the possibly intentional grotesquery of "To Fly Or Not Fly", which is as overdone and gauche as a Power Station remix. It's the lighter, trickier touches that stick in the head: the stop-start Cuban beats of "The Trouble With Candyhands", or the jump cuts between sprinting drums and crabbled guitar/synth breakdowns on "Bad Kids To The Front".

Which brings us back to King Crimson. When the best things about a group's songs are the fancy muso moves, you're talking prog, and despite the quartet's pop ambitions, they still have one cloven appendage stuck shin-deep in that mire.

Bill Meyer

Gareth Dickson

Quite A Way Away

12K CD

Gareth Dickson has played live accompanying Vashti Bunyan, but when describing his music, it's hard to avoid mentioning Nick Drake. Dickson admits that he was formerly obsessed with him and sings with a soft, rounded tone, his words glancing off the flow of the melody as Drake's did, particularly on *Pink Moon*.

Yet the Scottish guitarist and singer is an artist of real originality. He composes songs by editing together ideas from freewheeling guitar improvisations and it yields a distinctive vocabulary of unusual chord changes, diversions and codas. Dickson's guitar playing is remarkably fluid, with enough reverb to give a sweet, spangly luminosity to the higher notes and a drone-like undertow on the lower ones that reminds of Dean McPhee, but is often anchored by a tolling, Bert Jansch-style rhythmic approach.

On the seven minute "Get Together" and the instrumental title track his approach is