Alice’s Muscle goes limp
by Harlo Wilcox

Muscle of Love - Alice Cooper (Warner Bros.)

This is the Alice Cooper Group’s 3rd album to date, and, except for their first, Pretzel Far Out, is their weakest. Of course, few groups last this long intact, and of those that do, most are sounding pretty run down. It’s hard to see how Alice and his boys could be running out of inspirational material, for “We’re the ultimate American band, merely the end product of an affluent society,” to quote Mr. Cooper. The boys watch a lot of television. And the other week “Alice Cooper” was the answer to one of the questions on Jeopardy, and host Art Fleming remarked that Alice was a regular user and thanks for watching. Alice has also said that you could get the equivalent of a liberal arts degree watching TV game shows. Yet TV is an area they’ve never explored. They’re all gun freaks, and in 1972 the band spent over $30,000 for beer alone. The American effort in sports, pro sports, Boy Scouts, comic books, there’s so much they could have fun with. Instead, Alice and the group continue to dig into their past: teenage alienation in the Fabulous Fifties. They were all friends in HiSkool, having met on the track team and school paper (track team for mugo, paper to get girls, or as they hoped), Neal, Dennis, Glen, Mike and Vinnie(Alice) were the punk rock guitar men in Memphis, spent their time shouting, lighting, where, watching TV, and wrapping their T-shirts around telephone poles. The rock band thing started out as a hack ski at a track banquet, but eventually panned out into the real thing.

And much of Muscle of Love is nostalgia: Side one has some sort of plot line; Ohio hick goes to New York City to hit it big (“Big Apple Dreamin”), has to hustle to survive (“Never Been Sold Out”), becomes bitterly jaded (“Hard-Hearted”), ends up in the slam, gets out, gets shot, dies (“Crazy Little Child”). Not all that interesting, and hardly presented with the same two-toned rock sound, something anonymous while still posed and self-conscious. “Hard-Hearted Alice” is a slow mournful throwaway, and “Crazy Little Child” is a rinky tinky little number, Alice sounding like a cross between Leon Russell and Danny Kaye, and very bored.

Alice Cooper exhibited brilliant command over the commercial potential of earnestly subject matter while sticking to the brains musically. Even the theatrical showmanship of his last, Billion Dollar Babies, was calculated, never either getting out of hand or letting up. In contrast, Muscle of Love is confined and amateur. The bulk of packaging cere, no thematic purpose: the Institute of Nude Wrestling and the group as drunken, sloshed, on leave, on the inner sleeve and the credits sheet (which turns into a book cover: back to HiSkool) is never expanded on the record. There is virtually no thematic unity to the record, as worked on well on their last three. And why has dwarf Bill Bardy (whom Mr. Trudisch, Dean of Boys) been adopted into the fold?

Side two has a couple palpable tunes, “Muscle of Love” is a knock-out AM single, in the tradition of “Under My Wheels,” “School’s Out,” and “Elec’ted.” “Crazy Little Child” is explained, beyond the shadow of a doubt, what the “muscle of love” actually is, and it ain’t the heart. Probably the reason the nude wrestling bit and the lady-with-the-hula-hooping-jeans motif were adopted was to distract from and camouflage the true meaning of the album’s title. But the subject isn’t touched on beyond the title cut. “Working Up a Sweat” is a little lighter, using more traditional rock chordings, this album’s “No More” made into a pastiche of a pseudo-Fifties’ song. I don’t care to guess what it is, but Lizzy Minnell, the LaBelle sisters, Ronnie Spector, and the Pointer Sisters should know, as they sing in the background.

“The Man With the Golden Gun” is similar in temperament to McCartney’s “Live and Let Die.” It seems to me I recall reading that Ian Fleming’s James Bond novel never made it into a movie, and this could just be the theme. It’s built like a movie theme should be: tense, nice, throw away. “Woman Machine” is a clever bit with electric and machine noises, but it is at best pretty lame.

Muscle of Love will be, I think, enjoyed only by hard core, terminal Alice Cooper fans, and is hardly suited for the general consumption. Tracing some of the influences through Alice’s records, one can see he’s stagnating: too much of a good thing. We Alice Cooper fans can accept the band formula, unfazed, caught with their musical pants down. Otherwise, it’s a surprisingly boring, bland, comprehensively, along with its melodically, thematically vacuous, uninsulting drag of an album. One to be forgiven and forgotten.

Ray Davies of the Kinks

photo by Donna Paula

Preserved
in the Act

by Mark Astolfi

Preservation Act I - The Kinks (RCA)

After two uninspired albums on RCA, Yourself Hysterics and Everyday’s in Show Biz, Ray Davies is finally back on the beam with Preservation Act I, the title of which is irritating, harkening back to Lola vs. Powerman and the Money Go Round Vol. I, of which there was never a volume 2. But the music is far from irritating, the cleverest and most imaginative since Arthur, of which this record is a worthy, if belated, successor. Past Kinks albums have been built around a central theme and Preservation is no exception: here, it seems to be the march of the money-eaters (represented by real estate fiend Flash) versus the inward-searching humanist (portrayed by The Trapman), with the Captain Mainframe in the middle. There is no cohesive plot really: each song is merely a tableau, and there are devices enough to include: a Fifties nostalgia song and a hilarious allegory between cricket (title sport) and religion.

By now, it’s pretty clear that Ray Davies isn’t the rockin’ wilier that he used to be, and he needn’t be at that. The Kinks number eight, their ranks swelled by a horn section, and Ray makes excellent use of the band, as well as the off-shored female backing vocals, here used tastefully: Ray realizes they’re far from obligatory, unlike many current groups. A couple issues are up tempo, but no hard-nosed stuff like “Lola.” “Victoria,” “Bloodmoney,” or “Powerman” are more like drunken sailors on leave. Developed on the basics musically. Even to the-