Shot Down By Both Sides: Notes from the Music Wars

URGHA: A Music War, Various Artists on A&M Revoh!

Every once in a while, a record company will issue a sampler of artists on labels that the company distributes. Samples are released in order to stimulate interest in the particular type of music presented and in the artists featured.

This is not the case with this record, fortunately. URGHA is a two album set of live performances by top-notch new wave acts. By my count, twenty-seven internationally prominent and semi-prominent groups strut their stuff on these slabs of vinyl. By my count, sixteen cuts win big, three aren’t worth your time and eight are in the grey area in between.

There are too many good tunes here to mention. “Some Guy”, by Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, sounds at first listen like an ordinary bitewerst love song. Later on, you realize that Eno used gay was the name of the B-17 that dropped the Bomb on Hiroshima. Instrumentally, it’s a very lifting, flowing song, replete with some beautiful synth lines.

San Francisco’s finest, Oingo Boingo, brings us “An’ This the Life.” It’s strange with a capital S, musically. (What do you get when you cross “Yakkety Yak” with new wave?) The tune is frenetic, as is the ‘50’s-style sax work—thank God someone still knows how to play that way.

The Go-Go’s “We Got the Beat” and Joan Jett’s “Bad Reputation” both improve on the original versions. The lack of studio processing brings out a rough edge in the vocals that is normally lacking in female vocals and girl-groups. “We Got the Beat” is much better than the version on Rough and the Row, there’s less straining in the vocals and more guitar work. “Bad Reputation” brings to mind that Joan’s an ex-Runaway.

“This is a song about taking orgasmons” heralds the entry from the Au Pairs, “Come Again” is understated, with Pinch dither-sound and screamed vocals. And, if you’re interested the answer is yes, very explicitly so.

“Where’s Captain Kirk?” by Anthelcic Spizz ’80 (last year’s model) is indeed about your favorite (and mine) Star Trek phenomenon. It’s in the same genre as “Monster Mash” and “General Hospital,” although it’s not as musically together as either. It’s just as fun, however, if not more so.

“The Peeper” is not on either of the Echo and the Bunnymen albums. This tune is post-Echo— a real drummer instead of the rhythm machine — and hails from the Psychotic Furs School. The vocals here are less strained than Richard Butler’s efforts.

If there’s one song I must recommend for quality listening, it’s Pere Ubu’s “Birds.” It’s artsy, it’s strange, it’s even got random bird calls. It’s indescribably delicious—marginal.

You must have his dogs and URGHA is no exception. “Dance” by Toyah is insufferable—more pretentious than you can imagine. Klaus Nomi’s “Total Eclipse” is operatic new wave—the two don’t go together well at all. Also, skip “Down in the Park” by Gary Numan—if you just Bone-like posturing, listen to Bowe.

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