Johnny Burma's certain fate

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I owe my existence to music. I have a confession to make. Even though I think Mission of Burma makes the best music ever to come out of Boston, I am extremely reluctant to review their new debut album. Emotions can't help but take over, either one is totally indifferent to their music, or one is intensely committed to it. I take on the task only under duress, succumbing to the psychological pressure imposed on me by a former arts editor. "You should be ashamed if you don't review the Mission of Burma LP for this issue," he berated. I suspect he is so insistent only because he wants someone else's head (namely mine) to be on the chopping block.

No previous preparation short of a live Burma performance could ready me for the impact of it. This is raw, powerful music full of rage; one of the most blatant proclamations of punk's original values, presented with a punk's unshakable honesty. The band successfully achieves the transition from the harsh white light of the stage to the calm persistence of vinyl, with little loss of energy.

The album opens with "Secrets," an older tune that is one of the highlights of a live Burton set, and most representative of their current sound. The song is propelled by guitarist Roger Miller's vicious, hacking rhythm attack and Clint Conley's insistent bass, all backed by Peter Prescott's inimitable drumming. Restless change signal a structure change with a drum roll, Prescott announces a switch with a sudden explosion from all the drums, seemingly at once. Also not to be ignored is the contribution of fourth member Martin Swope, who manipulates the bass's live sound from behind the mixing board. Swope's tap loops and variable-speed vocal effects.

It is after the first song that poor rock sequencing takes its toll. A frenetic roarer like "Secrets" should not be followed by a slow, meditative tune like "Train"—the lead should be gradual, not abrupt. Conley's brooding ruminations seem terribly out of place with the rest of this material, hardly what should be expected from the man who penned "Academy Fight Blues" and "That's When I Read for My Revolver." The band is capable of performing slow tunes, as attested by "Born Two," a pensive, almost floating piece with beautiful split octave harmonies.

Despite the presence of "New Nails" (an anti-organized religion statement) and the Prescott-penned "Learn How" (a message of hope—"Don't ever give up, learn how"), side one of this disc leaves the listener unsettled, as if torn between two conflicting moods. Side two saves everything by kicking the proceedings into overdrive.

The side two opener, "Mica," is this album's "Academy." Accurate music instrumentation and vocals should guarantee its hit status. "Black Music," one of the old standby, receives the definitive treatment, perfectly capturing Miller's sputtering feedback. This is the stretch of "Mica," and it's simple to see why it's the orchestral joust, the great lyrics "Time slides through the wires..." and then all hell breaks loose.

Hell in this case takes the form of "Fun World" and "That's How I Escaped My Certain Fate," probably the two strongest songs from Burma's recent repertoire. Both songs go a long way to reaffirm the band's stance as angry, committed punks, with a message to deliver. While both tunes are commentaries of the "life-sucks" variety, they also speak of ways to overcome the bastards and live on one's own terms. The contrast between "Fun World"'s heavy metal disco shuffle and "Certain Fate"'s loud-fast-rules overdrive (complete with grossly distorted vocals) demonstrates the diversity of Burma's talent.

While it may not be the best vehicle for exploring the Burma audience, as such an accurate, long-overdue snapshot of an important band. Dedicated listening is required at times in order to overcome Rick Harte's lapes into "wall of murder" production, and sheer patience is required to quell the impatience with Clint Conley's excellent but somewhat kitsch, and hardly what should be expected from the man who penned "Academy Fight Blues" and "That's When I Read for My Revolver." The band is capable of performing slow tunes, as attested by "Born Two," a pensive, almost floating piece with beautiful split octave harmonies.

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