

# Random record roundup



**The Man From Utopia, Frank Zappa on Barking Pumpkin Records.**

Frank Zappa's 35th — that's right, 35th — album finds him sinking deeper into the morass of scatology and bad taste he's been creating since the dissolution of the Mothers of Invention. His once scathing social commentary has been supplanted by his desire to rub our noses in our own cultural refuse, with less than satisfactory results.

When Zappa amuses it's because his targets are mere caricatures: The Disco Boy, the Dancin' Fool, and the Valley Girl were the subjects of jokes long before Zappa joined in the derision. When he tackles larger issues, however, Zappa falls flat on his face, as is evidenced by *The Man From Utopia*, a desultory collection of half-baked ideas and weak instrumentals.

As is the case with other Zappa albums, *Utopia* incorporates one new idea and works it to death; in this case the idea is the guitar-voice duet in both "The Dangerous Kitchen" and "The Jazz Discharge Party Hats." Both tracks are based on live performances in which Zappa sang lyrics to a simple accompaniment. Guitarist Steve Vai transcribed Zappa's singing and reproduced the melody note for note in

the studio, where the tracks were combined to produce the duet. The resulting sounds, at times suggestive of George Benson on acid, are the only truly humorous moments on the album, amusing despite the ridiculous lyrics.

Elsewhere in *Utopia* we find Zappa discoursing on cocaine abuse ("Cocaine Decisions"), bad science fiction movies ("The Radio is Broken"), labor unions ("Stick Together"), and sex ("Sex") with his usual misanthropic cynicism, taking swipes we've all heard before at easy targets. The three short instrumentals provide little relief, serving only to remind us of the paucity of Zappa's compositional ideas.

I feel obliged to mention, even at the risk of being accused of nitpicking, how little music — less than 37 minutes — there is on *The Man From Utopia* or any other Zappa release since 1977. I know he's out to make a buck, but he also decries record industry tactics. Heaven knows there's enough Zappa material in the vaults to make another 35 records, so why is he spreading it so thin? Why doesn't he just shut up and play his guitar? For the answers to these and more questions, wait for the next Zappa manifesto, *The Man Who Sold the World*.

**"Ha" Killing Joke Live, on Editions EG Records.**

Killing Joke's 1981 debut showed it to be a clever synthesis of punk sensibilities, heavy metal attack, and electronics laden gloom. It also showed the group to be somewhat derivative, although no direct influences could be cited. The release of this six-song live EP finally makes clear who is influencing whom: Killing Joke is little more than a Public Image Ltd. clone.

Stripped of all the production and Teutonic sheen imparted by producer Konrad Plank (also Kraftwerk's producer), Killing

Joke has to rely on its own rather spare sound in a live situation. In lieu of treated vocals, Jaz tries to impart a raspy gurgle to his singing, but he inevitably fails to maintain the sound and falls back on his Johnny Rotten-esque British accent.

The live mix renders the band's limited sonic palette to the point where the proceedings sound monochromatic, with guitars and synthesizers melding into a wall of indiscernible noise.

"Ha" is the work of a band that has never lived up to its initial potential. The joke was never funny; now it's time for a mercy killing.



**Beat Surrender, the Jam on Polydor Records.**

"Understand kiddiwinks, that there are times, undoubtedly, when it's a kick to be alive..." Thus spake Paul Weller, guiding light of the Jam, in the notes for his band's final single. After one listen you'll understand that the Jam had a real kick recording this EP, a double single. "Beat Surrender" is in the running for the best song the band ever made, and "Shopping" is their second best B side (after "Dreams of Children"). What makes this EP such a delight, however, is the second side's trio of rhythm and blues classics, a set of lovingly rendered homages to the Jam's influences. Curtis Mayfield's "Move On Up" and Barrett Strong's "War" take on a new life, fueled by the Jam's boundless energy and heartfelt playing.

It's always sad when a band dissolves at its creative peak, but the Jam have provided us with a fitting farewell, and a reminder: "... only when coffee and milk are mixed do they both become delicious



under the banner of the beat surrender brothers and sisters, it's then you make your mind up."

## ARTS ARTS

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**The King of Comedy, original soundtrack produced by Robbie Robertson, on Warner Brothers Records.**

*The King of Comedy* soundtrack is a rarity in the record business: a cohesive film score that is also a collection of singles. What further distinguishes this compilation is the unavailability of these singles elsewhere. Producer Robbie Robertson, former writer/guitarist/vocalist for The Band, has compiled 10 songs from the outtake bins of various recording artists and ordered them into what could serve as a greatest hits collection.

The only two tunes written specifically for the film — Robertson's own "Between Trains" and Bob James' "King of Come-

dy" — are, unfortunately, the only two flops. In a way it's Robertson's own fault: How could he expect his song to stand up to the Pretenders' "Back on the Chain Gang" or Van Morrison's "Wonderful Remark"?

There's something for everybody on this soundtrack, be it the new wave contributions of the Talking Heads ("Swamp") and Ric Ocasek ("Steal the Night"), the blues of B. B. King and Ray Charles, or the cocktail jazz of David Sanborn. If you're a fan of any of these artists, you'll want this record. After all, you won't find these songs anywhere else.

It's nearly impossible to detect any of this music in the movie.



**Beeswax: Some B-Sides 1977-1982 and Waxworks: Some Singles 1977-1982, XTC on Virgin Records (Import).**

XTC have done it again: The initial pressing of *Beeswax* comes with a "free" copy of *Waxworks*, making this double record compilation the finest of the genre. *Waxworks* contains a representative sample of XTC's hit singles spanning their whole career. If you've bought the recent reissues of the band's first three albums, *Waxworks* becomes essential, being the only recording on which you'll find "Making Plans for Nigel" (released only as a single) and "Science Friction" (originally released on a four-song EP).

*Beeswax* proves XTC renders the distinctions "A-side" and "B-side" meaningless. Every one of these tunes could be a hit, especially "Smokeless Zone," "Punch and Judy," and "Heaven is Paved with Broken Glass." What these discs collectively prove is XTC's prowess as pop songwriters.

Taken together, *Waxworks* and *Beeswax* serve as a concise retrospective of XTC's career, displaying the band's prodigious maturity in five short years. Essential listening in every respect, this compilation charts XTC's progress as they draw ever closer to the great art-pop mean.

David Shaw