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**The Man From Utopia**

Frank Zappa on Barking Pumpkin Records.

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 more caricatures. The Disco Boy, the Dancin' Fool, and the Valley Girl were the subjects of jokes long before Zappa joined in the decision. When he tackles larger issues, however, Zappa falls flat on his face, as is evidenced by The Man From Utopia, a derrisive collection of half-baked ideas and weak instruments.

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/vocal duet in both 'The Dangerous Kitchen' and 'The Jazz Discharge Party Plan.' 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, amazing 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 new Zappa manifesto, The Man Who Sold the World.

**Random record roundup**


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 trou- tonal complexities imparted by producer Konor Plank (also Kraftwerk's producer), Killing Joke has to rely on its own rather sparse 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 undistinguishable noise. "Ha" is the work of a band that has never lived up to its initial potential. The jok- e's only real asset is 'When I'm Not Dancin' 'cause, 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: "It's 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."