

OKKERVIL RIVER

The Stand Ins

86%



JAGJAGUWAR

Okkervil River's newest volume of inhorn pop gladly receives the torch from last year's *The Stage Names* and marches right along. Originally planned as the second half of a double album when added to *Names*, *The Stand Ins* is rich with traces of its former counterpart. Will Sheff's musings on the anti-climatic existence of a pensive pop star carry through here, with stylistic musical dabblings that allow Sheff's literary style of songwriting to keep fresh. For instance, the country folk of "Singer Songwriter" could be a long lost relative of Johnny Cash's "Home of the Blues," and the cheery synth, so instantly grabbing on "Pop Lie," contrasts its subject; the self-referential betrayal of a devoted lover. At its heart, *The Stand Ins* is a story of self-discovery. On opener "Lost Coastlines," the narrator is at sea without a home, physically or philosophically. In the span of 11 short chapters, love is found, lost and finally rediscovered on the second bookend, "Bruce Wayne Campbell Interviewed on the Roof of the Chelsea Hotel, 1979." Here our narrator is setting sail again, in the nick of time: "Well, your eyes flash out a warning, but there'll be another morning, afternoon and tonight/Fuck long hours sick with singing, let's cash my check and drink along." Well, let us all raise a glass and turn the page. **KYLE MacKINNEL**

BEN FOLDS

Way to Normal

80%



EPIC

On his third solo record, *Way to Normal*, Ben Folds leaps out the gate, stomping on an Elton John piano riff over the noise of a canned arena crowd. He sings his story of a would-be triumphant concert, wherein he "busted ass off the front of the stage." ("Hiroshima (B B B Benny Hits his Head)" it's cutely called.) Ben's singing voice is a little affected here—a problem throughout the record, really, whether it's that of indie rock whininess or professional theatricality. But no sweat; the record's spirit and creativity overcome. "Dr. Yang," with its more sincere singing about doctors, crescendos with furry pedal distortion and Ben's surprising but decidedly hot Cobain-like scream. When "The Frown" mentions presenting a "waitress with your allergy card," the album seems to have a debilitation theme, and just as I'm thinking this peppy ditty reminds me of the mall, Ben suddenly mentions the Anthropologie store. Folds' hyper-sincere balladry on "Cologne" is followed by a joyous song about his errant dog, called "Errant Dog," and then by the sweet tiny distorted drum machine of "Free Coffee." The record contains many great spontaneous details and nearly as many backing vocal tricks as an Eminem disc. For these among other reasons, even when *Way to Normal* is annoying, Folds sounds very inspired. **MICHAEL PATRICK WELCH**

BLITZEN TRAPPER

Furr

87%



SUB POP

On last year's *Wild Mountain Nation*, Blitzen Trapper shouted loud about rising up and going home; with *Furr*, their Sub Pop debut, they have. The Portland schizos return to their noise-folk home base, trimming most of *WMN*'s fat and leaving a stoned country skeleton in its place. Where the genre-stretching of their last record could become exhausting, *Furr*'s tight structures and stripped bones soar. Not that they've abandoned that record's sonic spectrum entirely; there's plenty of buried headphone treasures throughout, and they still steal gleefully from your parents' best records. There are shades of *American Beauty*, *After the Gold Rush*, and *Blonde on Blonde* here, and on the title track, the cooed vocals of Big Star's *#1 Record* fall in to form some cosmic shade of burnout folk. The proggy dub jam of "Echo/Always On/Easy Con" notwithstanding, things are falling skyward for Blitzen Trapper. **MARTY GARNER**

SÉBASTIEN TELLIER

Sexuality

89%



RECORD MAKERS

It is unfair to compare anything French with anything non-French. To whom, you ask? I will only say that theirs' is a twilight zone which we interlopers can never understand. Obviously, *Sexuality* claims big concept-album wampum by title choice alone. This is synth-stab heavy and demands a superb stereo system to be properly heard—it is the svelte and subtle production elements here that matter. I will warn you: There is much lascivious moaning, softly... as though someone is having their nether regions stroked with a special ostrich feather. Such ululations being accompanied by exotic baselines imply that Tellier, the incorrigibly bearded and tuxedo-wearing rake that he is, may very well be having naughty thoughts. Yes, eroticism reigns imperial here—slow-moving glissandos which beam treacherous visions of sacrilegious space-fantasy porno films à la the 1970s. Many of the minimalist instrumentals such as "Sexual Sportswear" and "Fingers of Steel" come straight from the soundtrack to Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. The secret entry point to the album is "Divine," a winning Beach Boys ode to sunshine, Speedos and uni-sex body hair. Alas, even by French standards Tellier has never been conventional; his first LP, *L'Incrovable Vérité* (2001), possesses no percussion elements whatsoever, yet led to his debutante ball as admiring countrymen Air brought him aboard their label and, hence, ordained him part of *haute couture*. Playfully dissipative, precise and demented, *Sexuality* ferments to a downtempo Kama Sutra froth meant for those with a taste for the fantastic and/or the peculiar. **MARKUS VON PFEIFFER**

DEERHUNTER

Microcastle

88%



KRANKY

For a band known for droning freak-outs, Deerhunter's *Microcastle* is anything but. On the Atlanta five-piece's third LP, frontman Bradford Cox and his mighty crew tone down their rambling grooves (see last year's *Cryptograms*) for something far more accessible, marvelously blending its crunchy noise core with often striking melodies and beautifully airy movements. Cox, the principle songwriter, has said for this record he became obsessed with micro-composition, and it befits them, focusing on writing songs more succinctly. And, of course, the same goes for those gorgeous moments of sheer eccentricity, of which there are many. Potential hits are here, such as the second song, "Agoraphobia," which is preceded by a brief intro track of wavering guitars and building rhythms and starts immediately with Cox's smooth plea for captivity in a six-by-six concrete cell. "Never Stops" and "Nothing Ever Happened" are both noteworthy too, relying heavily on themes of discontent with reasonably catchy chorus lines collecting sharp guitars and tastefully backing messes of eerie distortion. These songs also pay a service of splitting the album's more tranquilized portions so as neither the ups nor downs become too much to handle. Surely, *Microcastle* shows Deerhoof progressing with reason, creating one of their best releases yet. **COLIN STUTZ**

I'M FROM BARCELONA

Who Killed Harry Houdini?

72%



MUTE

Last year's joyous *Let Me Introduce My Friends* always ran the risk of sounding like a sugar-coated train wreck of cloying indie-pop detritus—all kazoos and handclaps with not much lyrical fortitude. If that album's giddy introduction served as Act I, *Who Killed Harry Houdini?* is where the drama of adolescence begins to spoil your sugar high. This time, the 29-member Jönköping, Sweden, collective opts for a darker and altogether less interesting musical vernacular. Lead singer Emanuel Lundgren's desire to escape the bludgeoning realities of adulthood is manifested in the insular world betwixt his ears in "Headphones." The Technicolor charm of yore rematerializes only on the unabashed "Mingus" and the banjo-tinged single "Paper Planes." The latter follows the exploits of an apartment dweller that tries