



Mr. Lif
I Phantom

★★★★

Dreaded MC avenger weaves an explosive cautionary tale

[Definitive Jux] Mr. Lif's full-length debut *I Phantom* is a conceptual satire starring an everyman caught up in events beyond his control. Opening with a series of nightmares that slowly dissolve into a short stint as an office worker on "Live At the Plantation," an abortive marriage and other misadventures, Lif vividly paints a picture of a young man's struggle to evolve into a conscious, politically aware being. Each track is a self-contained experience reflecting the protagonist's perspective: "Friends and Neighbors" is a fanciful piece of gossip about a homicide in his neighborhood, while "Return of the B-Boy" finds him imagining himself saving hip-hop.

Lif's strengths as an MC make his tight narrative focus on the protagonist's plights palpable. Touting a monotone voice reminiscent of Gang Starr's Guru, Lif peppers his verses with grim observations like, "The purpose of our life is just to serve the economy/They misinform our minds to paint a picture of harmony." Girding him are guest producers like Insight, who drops the humorous and organ-inflected "Status"; Edan, who shifts samples midway through "Live From the Plantation" from an aggrieved guitar riff to a triumphant horn chorus as the protagonist happily quits his job; El-P ("Post Mortem") and Faks One. Thanks to Lif's exceptional storytelling abilities, *I Phantom* gathers a momentum that's only quieted by "Post Mortem" and the protagonist's "guilt for every single I've ever bought and sold," imparting a well-told morality tale in the process.

Mosi Reeves



Nightmares on Wax
Mind Elevation

★★★

Warp's token downtempo artist returns with a cup full of wide-eyed soul

[Warp] *Mind Elevation*, the first full-length album of original material from Nightmares on Wax since 1999's *Carboot Soul*, is primarily distinguished by George Evelyn's distinctive production style. Working in funk and hip-hop, Evelyn flattens out his sounds so as to make them less supple and more buoyant, with the bass lines counterbalanced against the drums rather than bleeding over the recording. You can hear the results on songs like "Environment," where Melanie Blamforth declaims against a jaunty track led by a flute and staccato horns. Then there's the luxurious "Mind Eye," a laid-back yet melodic joint on which strings swirl over an easygoing bass groove. Even then, each instrument — or sample, as the case may be — is thrown into sharp relief like parallel train tracks, intersecting at various points to become a harmonious whole.

While meticulously arranged, *Mind Elevation* contains its share of anonymous, carbon-copy beats: "Humble" is a three-minute instrumental that ultimately leads nowhere, while "Bleu My Mind" compiles a handful of string samples into an interminably long track. Nightmares on Wax's strong point is Evelyn and Blamforth's enthusiasm for music, so readily apparent on the bright and optimistic "Destiny," on which Blamforth is aided by a loop constructed of laughing voices; and "Know My Name," where she accents her life-affirming verses with an assured "uh-huh." There are worse things one could do than spend this Indian summer smoking a joint and listening to *Mind Elevation*.

Mosi Reeves



Scion
Arrange and Process Basic Channel Tracks

★★★★★

Organic, otherworldly techno classics revisited for the CD generation

[Tresor] Basic Channel. A series of nine records from 1993-95 that changed the course of techno forever. Each was different from the next, but from between their collective grooves something new emerged. Such was their impact that Mark Ernestus and Moritz von Oswald's groundbreaking dub-techno still resonates as strongly today as it ever did. Maybe even more so, given the number of releases that we've since seen that have clearly ripped off/been inspired by Basic Channel's drifting, textured and spacious sound, not to mention the fact that the records are still played in clubs today.

Scion were amongst their very first protégés, so it's fitting that they should be given the job of revisiting Basic Channel's few releases for this neat twist on the mix-CD format. Using Ableton Live software, Peter Kuschnerreit and Rene Löwe have created nine "new" tracks from chunks from the original nine Basic Channel records plus a few other key releases and remixes, then segued them together to form a continuous 55-minute mix.

The results are curiously both new and old; fresh in format, yet entirely familiar in sound. No question, those uniquely organic, otherworldly, shifting grooves are instantly recognizable and every bit as absorbing as ever, and when the CD ends, the silence is almost deafening. To be honest, as good a job as they've done, Scion would really have had to go some to make a mess of this and in the end, *Arrange and Process* succeeds primarily through the strength of its original source material — truly classic, timeless techno.

Tom Magic Feet



Skhool Yard
A New Way of Thinking

★★★

Uneven rhymes and hot beats from Planet Asia's crew

[Threshold] Planet Asia's gift for spitting impassioned verses rightly transformed the one-time Fresno, CA, unknown into a prominent West Coast rhyme slinger. With his major-label debut yet to hit shelves, Asia has joined Fresno pals Skhool Yard for a solid, if unspectacular, record.

Skhool Yard is made up of Planet Asia, Kubiq, Shake and Supa Supreme. While each verbalist grabs the same amount of mic time here, it's clear they're not on equal footing when it comes to lyrical ability. Planet Asia's fireball approach easily overshadows his brethren with quips like, "Soon as I let my pen stroke/My words leave ya shin broke" on "Rap Moguls." Kubiq, who's got his own LP under his belt, offers clever couplets but plays a distant second. Bringing up the rear, Shake's baritone isn't overly compelling and Supa Supreme acts as the crew's low-flow caboose (see "Sit Back and Chill").

While the caliber of Skhool Yard's rhymes ebbs and flows, quality production is a neck-snapping constant. Kutmasta Kurt serves up choppy barks with high-pitched guitar snips for one of his best concoctions since "Work the Angles" on "Rap Moguls" and confidently flexes a looping mandolin throughout "Fashion Show." Providing most of the tracks, Kurt plays with horns that will sound familiar to fans of Queens rapper Royal Flush on "Cigar Splitters." Protest also steps in for "Days of Our Lives" and deftly employs an emotive flute. The clique clearly recognizes the behind-the-board talent, and the instrumental versions following each original track prove an unusual but welcome addition.

Craig Smith



Supreme Beings of Leisure
Divine Operating System

★★★★

It takes awhile to get there, but the second time is indeed the charm for these sonic spy kids

[Palm Pictures] The Supreme Beings of Leisure's sophomore effort starts out sounding like an ultra-chic doppelganger to the Spice Girls. But once the first two tracks have plodded away to their respective holes in the ground, "Catch Me" streaks from the gate, an expansive wash reminiscent of early James Bond film themes — slinky and seductive, mixing happy pills with martinis. Close on its heels is "Get Away," an enthusiastic pumper reminiscent of the Propellerheads.

Since the sleeper success of their eponymous debut, the organic elements of the band (guitarist Rick Torres and bassist Kiran Shahani) are no longer. In the wake of their exodus, the remaining members (multi-instrumentalist Ramin Sakurai and the silver-voiced Geri Soriano) have recruited a host of blue ribbon-winning collaborators. For only \$15.99 (suggested retail price), you can enjoy the stylings of Beck's wax mechanic DJ Swamp, Dust Brothers' bassist Sheldon Strickland and engineer Jimi Randolph, who's helped funk up Al Green and Earth, Wind & Fire records. Predominately shimmering and languid, at its raciest *Divine Operating System* achieves a poppy, disco canter that trades ass-slapping soul for sleek sensuality — think Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" copulating with Portishead to produce a lovechild more at home in Los Angeles' Skybar than Club 54. At times it sprints and at times it slides, but always with a colorful, cosmopolitan athleticism that lends itself equally to cocktail hour on the Concord and Zen retreats on Mars.

Mark von Pfeiffer