

CD Reviews



The Universe
"The Outer Void Intrepid Sailor"
 Microindie Records

Space: the final musical frontier? On The Universe's 2006 musical odyssey, "The Outer Void Intrepid Sailor," space is the overall concept, with the album chronicling a man's journey through the farthest reaches of space in search of an end to the universe. The 12 tracks delineate various points in the trip, from his being chosen to take-off to the myriad of emotions he goes through as he floats through the great beyond.

The Universe is composed of brothers Lachlan and Gus Franklin, and Ben Browning. The Australian trio put "The Outer Void Intrepid Sailor" together in between working with other bands, including the critically acclaimed Architecture in Helsinki.

What results is an elaborate and often brilliant album that is dreamy and delicate — a CD that works both as a touching conceptual narrative and as a blissful indie-pop album.

The songs run the musical gamut, defying any sort of classification. The album starts off lightly with the melodic "The Bigness of Small Things," but then kicks up with an over-processed bass sound for "The Announcement," building into an unimaginably high-pitched harmony that would make the lead singer of Boston jealous.

The diversity of the album becomes apparent by the time you hit "A.O.K. Up Here," which starts off with a dirge-like a cappella part and slowly evolves into a somber song with just vocals and guitar.

"The Outer Void Intrepid Sailor" is a wonderful album that keeps you guessing from track to track. The Universe's influences seem to touch on acts such as The Flaming Lips, Granddaddy and David Bowie, but the band has an original enough sound that the album sounds like a wholly original work.

The biggest drawback of this album is that it's on a small label and will likely be difficult to acquire in stores. If you are unable to order it — or just want to circumvent that issue all together — it's available at www.microindie.com for the bargain price of \$10.

Scott Rosenberg

Robert Stillman
"Horses"
 Mill Pond Records

The music of Portland, Ore.-based saxophonist/composer Robert Stillman is surreptitiously cinematic in scope, coming off like



The members of The Universe prepare for space on their new album, "The Outer Void Intrepid Sailor," on Microindie Records.



some unused backing track to a BBC crime mystery featuring an elegant and worldly detective who prefers to travel by train, and is never caught unaware.

On his solo debut, "Horses," Stillman certainly takes an auteur approach, spinning off seven equally engaging tracks that almost imperceptibly shift their pace and tone, swinging from swelling passion to cool reserve in the same measure. Taken as a whole, "Horses" whirls like a dancer in a slit skirt, each slow turn and quick step showing

you a glimpse of something you desperately want to see again, and each track another chance to capture it.

There are a multitude of influences present in Stillman's musical universe: a swirling melange of cool jazz and smoldering cabaret, bossa nova, waltz and West Coast experimental pop, dappled with unexpected flashes of classical melody reminiscent of Rodrigo and Ravel.

For such an unassumingly ambitious project, there are surprisingly few moments where the musical path leads down the primrose path of solo self-indulgence. The immaculate production (engineer Troy Tietjen has worked with the Decembrists and Death Cab for Cutie) lends "Horses" a timeless and simple quality rarely found in the modern era. If most current music is on the screaming display at the front of the bookstore, "Horses" can be located on the quieter floor, under the discreet sign marked "Literature."

Charles Devilbiss



We Are Scientists
"With Love and Squalor"
 Virgin Records

Finally, a band that can bring the corduroy-loving hipsters together with the booty-shaking bombshells. And even with a name referencing science, there's not a pocket protector in sight.

On "With Love and Squalor," We Are Scientists exhibits the same kind of science fair alchemy that has made bands like Bloc Party, The Killers and Kaiser Chiefs so popu-

lar — electronic-heavy dance tracks, retro New Wave catchiness, jittery rhythms that reek of hyperactivity — but without all the pretension and "Did they or didn't they?" pseudo-hedonism.

Sure, there are frosty beverages and female schmoozing aplenty on uptempo tunes like "Nobody Move, Nobody Get Hurt," "Can't Lose" ("The party's alright/I might want to stop drinking/What were we talking about?") and "This Scene Is Dead," but have you seen these guys? Not exactly your normal rock stars. One of them looks like the second coming of "Weird Al" Yankovic. If they're having this good a time, you know they're gonna chronicle every minute of it.

Singer Keith Murray's Britpop voice is perfect for this arty, post-punk sound, and he injects some skewering realism and humor (he sings, "You know you own my body buy don't think that you control my mouth" in the moody "Textbook") to ground the proceedings in a combo of universal melancholy and late-night revelry.

It's the variety of sounds, though, that has bestowed so much hype on these three lanky New Yorkers — from the expansive yet introspective chorus of "Lousy Reputation" to the driving minor-keyed riffs of "Cash Cow" to the classic snarling punk of "Callbacks." The only thing missing is the sonic qualities of an erupting papier-mache volcano.

With so much going on, the only science you have to worry about with these guys is making sure you do your grooveology homework.

Brian Truitt

Sia
"Colour the Small One"
 Astralwerks Records

The series finale of "Six Feet Under" ended one artistic endeavor and jump-started another:

Australian singer-songwriter Sia's haunting, piano-powered tune "Breathe Me" appeared on the show, and touched off a downloading fiesta on iTunes and other Web sites. The epic ballad is just a taste of the private moments and introverted thoughts that make up the majority of "Colour the Small One," although no other track comes close to its lyrical or sonic majesty. Instead, it's a mixed bag from the Tori Amos Finishing School for Angst.

Sia takes aspects from other like-minded songbirds like Kate Bush and Fiona Apple, and sounds like Nelly Furtado on a Steve Nicks kick on "Where I Belong," one of the few tracks that comes anywhere close to midtempo. This walking Lilith Fair tends mostly to the funereal strolls for her tunes. Sometimes it works, like with the gentle, emotional "Broken Biscuit." On "Rewrite," however, the chorus is the only aspect that keeps the 4-minute album opener, "Rewrite," from seeming like an arduous 4-hour trek through a sand metaphor.

"The Bully," a collaboration with Beck, and "Sweet Potato," about a woman's downward spiral of a co-existence with her lover, are much more successful in capturing her inner spirit — the one that inspired all those downloads in the first place.

Brian Truitt