

LET'S GO! STREET SCENE

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STREET BEAT

Loose — Victoria Williams

You sense such verve from this major-label debut that the star-studded "Sweet Relief" benefit album of her songs by friends like Lou Reed, Soul Asylum, Pearl Jam, Buffalo Tom, Michelle Shocked and many others doesn't seem possible to have been a money raiser for medical bills incurred by her multiple sclerosis. Indeed, Williams has always had a voice that might best be described as frail, falling somewhere between Buffy Sainte-Marie and Cyndi Lauper, but this is not the work of a woman weak by any measure.

From the opening line of "Century Plant" ("Outside my house is a cactus plant/They call the Century Tree/And only once in a hundred years/It flowers gracefully/And you never know when it will bloom"), Williams weaves a charming musical spell that winds its way through this superb collection of folk, rock and cabaret-style numbers.

"You Are Loved" has the best hooks this side of Neil Young, and Williams' duet with Dave Pirner of Soul Asylum on "My Ally" has all the inherent personality of the Velvet Underground's "I'm Sticking With You," which is to say it's a smile-inducer. Even her version of Spirit's "Nature's Way," one of three covers in this 16-cut treatise, is superb, down to the tympani fade. Other favorites here are her "Harry Went to Heaven," which puts me in mind of Rickie Lee Jones' best jazz work, and the Gram Parsons-ish "When We Sing Together," on which she is joined by Mark Olson of the Jayhawks.

It's the height of irony, perhaps, that it took a debilitating disease to bring Victoria Williams' name to a wider audience. That her name is finally out there, though, is the important thing.

— Mark E. Gallo

Mark E. Gallo is a freelance critic from Farmington Hills.

The Gate to the Mind's Eye — Thomas Dolby

From the man who blinded the mid-1980s musical masses with technological tunes, Thomas Dolby's "The Gate to the Mind's Eye" (Giant, 1994) has extended his musical intentions. However, it may be a far stretch.

Electronic keyboard-based music stirred up the musical world with an electrical blast a decade ago allowing bands and individual-based acts the freedom to control and direct an entire orchestra with a push of a few keys. As time progressed, the movement faded, leaving those artists along the wayside simply admiring others.

Some artists have survived, such as Depeche Mode and New Order which have allowed its music to evolve.

"The Gate to the Mind's Eye" has inspiring intentions, but falters by its own ambition. The nine-song release is a mish-mash of musical styles, all centered around electronic melodies, rare in today's simplistic genre or niche-based musical tastes.

The release begins with "Armageddon," a rough technological-based sounding piece with Dolby chanting Medieval Latin poetry verses and the moody feeling "Planet of the Lost Souls," which is an orchestrated piece with opera-based lyrics mixed over textured sounds.

The release continues with "The Ascent of Man, Part I-VI" an 8 1/2-minute piece with six musical phases intertwined, followed by an aged jazz-based tune entitled "Nuovo" which includes drums and horns. The release concludes with "Moonbase," a synthetic-sounding tune complete with Native American chants.

The track's most clever with "N.E.O." ("Near Earth Object") is a means of soft sounds overlaying a constructed modern, new age feel with lyrics focused on astrological items sung by Dr. Fiorella Terenzi, who holds a doctorate in astrophysics and has performed the first experiment translating radio waves from galaxies 180 million light years away into sounds. The result was released on her own album. Later on "The Gate to the Mind's Eye," Terenzi sings on a dance-based number entitled "Quantum Mechanic."

Dolby's intention on this release is a step above more modern technologically pleasing material. "The Gate to the Mind's Eye" does break away from new musical barriers than its musical forefathers accomplished a decade ago, but it is an interesting spin nonetheless.

— Kyle Green

Kyle Green is a freelance reporter from Lake Orion.

Have a listen

To hear music by She's So Huge (message 9), Chris Whitley (message 10), Reigning (message 11), Sarah McLachlan (message 12), Blue Rodeo (message 13), Wrigley (message 14), Sponge (message 15) and Buckshot LePonque (message 16) you can call the Street Scene Music Line at (313) 953-2025 on a touch-tone phone. Fast-forward to the corresponding message by pressing 33. To repeat a message, press 4.



Humble band:
All She's So Huge wants to do is make a living off of playing music. They seek your support on Friday, March 17, when they play Griff's Grill in Pontiac.

She's So Huge: Huge on optimism

Rich Deciantis and his bandmates in She's So Huge have their eyes firmly focused on the future. They want their music to support itself and they see their future including tours and playing "this stuff for everybody."

BY TODD WICKS
STAFF WRITER

To paraphrase Luke Skywalker, if there's a bright center to the rock'n'roll universe, East Lansing on a Sunday night is the city it's farthest from. Downstairs at Rick's American Cafe, a synth-heavy band of lanky youths seems rooted to the stage with fear as they finish up a New Order cover. A bouncer yawns and flirts with some college girls at the bar. For a while, the Celera machine in the corner is actually Rick's most popular attraction; that is, until about midnight when She's So Huge starts up.

Basist and lead singer Rich Deciantis, unfazed by the low attendance. "I mean, it's a Sunday night! Friday and Saturday night you've perturbed and spent all your money. Sunday night you just want to lay around and watch a movie or read a book."

A few weeks later, with the show safely behind them, he restates the obvious: "There just wasn't an audience there. It's hard to feed off of any energy when you don't have anybody staring you in the face. You just try and make everything go well so you can come back and play on a better night."

A fine gig

As for Deciantis' opinion of the band's performance, "It was one of our first gigs with our new drummer, but I was impressed because Ron hasn't had much time to fill in the shoes or get the feel for everything."

He said, "So I was impressed as far as that goes, but looking back, compared to how tight we are now, it was mediocre."

However tight the band was that Sunday, its intensity onstage was anything but mediocre. The bass-driven, Sabbath/Nirvana grind of the Clarkson trio is so powerful it's almost trance-inducing. Even the di-harder ballads seemed won over after a few songs.

Meanwhile, Deciantis is already anticipating a next time.

"I want to play there on a weekend, on a Thursday or a Friday or a Saturday," he said excitedly. "I want to have a bunch of screaming kids there and just rock, just get up there and

"It was an audition gig; I don't even think we played a half hour," said

say, "This is the way we jam."

With optimism like that, even a less than stellar gig can be viewed as a learning experience for the band.

"It's really a rehearsal," he said. "A stage rehearsal is a lot better than one in your jam room or wherever... (playing live) gives you all the obstacles you run into on an everyday performance level, whereas if you practice where you normally do, you know what it sounds like, you know how loud to turn it up because you've played in that room a thousand times. When you get up onstage, it's a different story."

The addition of Tippin is the first major lineup change in She's So Huge's four-year history. Deciantis is quick to credit ex-drummer Brent Beer for helping the band advance to a more professional level.

"We just lost one of the founding members, he said quietly. "He (Beer) went through a lot with us, brought us up to the point we are at right now."

Deciantis attributes the split to a difference in work ethic. "Things got to where the band was taking up a lot of our time, and it kind of lost its role of poetry, and not so much as a hard-working, back-breaking job. Once it turned into that for him, it just lost its appeal and he decided to move on."

Focused on future

But despite the reverie, eyes are firmly focused on the future.

"Luckily, we now have a very talented and qualified drummer, and the transformation was very smooth," Deciantis said, determinedly upbeat.

Meaning: subject closed.

In fact, get Deciantis started on the future and you'll hear only one ambition: "All I want to do is to have my music support itself," he declared. "I

want to be able to pay for the habit, you know what I'm saying? I want to tour, I want to go all over and play this stuff for everybody, I want everybody to hear it."

For him, success equals longevity, not financial gain.

"I don't want to be rich. I'd be happy just driving my van and living in some apartment for the rest of my life, just as long as I get to jam," he said. "I'm not going to deny myself certain things in life because of this, but right now things are going so smoothly that I'm going to take it as far as it'll go, and that could be either huge success or just two years from now."

Either way, Deciantis swears on being true to his music.

"You have to be sincere in this business, totally heartfelt," he said. "A person has to bleed onstage before people will say, 'Wow, this is a sincere thing that's happening here.' A lot of bands go on and you can see right through the act. People are just going through the motions; they're not actually feeling what they're playing."

And feeling is something She's So Huge insists on.

"No matter how often we play out," he added, "I always try to have the attitude that this might be the last time I'll ever get to express myself on this level."

Deciantis' intensity, like his band's, fills the room. There's an uncertain pause. Then he laughs. "That's probably why you'll go to a club with only a dozen people and we'll be onstage jamming like we were at Madison Square Garden."

She's So Huge performs Friday, March 17 at Griff's Grill, 49 N. Saginaw, Pontiac, (810) 334-9292; and Friday, March 31, at Lili's, 2930 Jacob, Hamtramck, (313) 876-6555.

Whitley is never too far from his music

BY TODD WICKS
STAFF WRITER

Chris Whitley speaks so softly over the telephone that any background noise on either end is a distraction. From his Atlanta hotel room, clearly audible against Whitley's thoughtful whisper comes a strange, ping-pong drone, what at first sounds like a Ravi Shankar tape or even the intro to "Paint It Black." The noise gradually turns into the familiar sound of a guitar being tuned.

Even during the interview, Whitley is never too far away from his music.

"Living With the Law," Whitley's 1991 debut, was a critical smash, full of acoustic blues and dusty grooves that were anything but fashionable. His new album, "Din of Ecstasy," due for release in late March, roars and clangs with the sound of a seasoned bluesman just discovering the electric guitar, and more importantly, distortion.

Now consistently backed by bass and drums, Whitley's songs like the fiery "O God My Heart Is Ready" and the sweeping "Voodoo Prey" reside somewhere in the decades between Jimi Hendrix and Dinosaur Jr. Whitley, intrigued as anyone about his newest left turn, the apparently urgent tuning job does not slow him from speaking volumes about his craft.

"I didn't realize 'Din' would be so different until we got into the studio, and even now I'm more aware of it than I was when we started rehearsing years ago," he said. "I have tapes of most of these songs from as far back as 1992, so it was a developing thing."

After years of playing solo, accompanied only by his acoustic guitar, the now electric-based trio format, including Rich Mercutio on drums and Alan Grayson on bass, has greatly changed things for Whitley. It has been his "perfect idea" of musical possibilities — the limitations of a trio, the very basic instruments.

So far, Whitley's music has been anything but



Settled in: Chris Whitley does a four-night stand at 7th House in Pontiac March 23-26.

elaborate. Plugging in has given "Din" a live-sounding feel, but the songs themselves remain elemental and stripped-down, not in sync with most of today's music.

"My rock references are more like my parents'," Whitley admitted. "I never listen to the radio and I don't get MTV and I never watch television. Stuff

like Zeppelin and Hendrix, Cream, the Doors, that stuff is more aesthetic."

To me, Howling Wolf has more in common with Nirvana than with most people playing blues now, like Clapton. It's just the urgency in the music. (What's called) blues today, I'm really not interested in."

Whitley's latest tour, what he calls the "residency thing," involves playing several nights in a row in the same city. The dates are loosely planned out to end on a high note.

For playing an entirely new style of music in front of unprepared audiences, Whitley's reception has been surprisingly favorable.

"The record hasn't come out yet, so I don't know what people will think of it, but the audiences," he said. "I like that it (the new material) appeals to people who are maybe a little more open-minded or listen to a little more visceral music, who listen in different ways."

Whitley's musical change of face was co-piloted by John Custer and Whitley who was attracted to Custer because "he's Southern and I thought he would have an R&B thing. I didn't want the album to get polished or too L.A.-metallic." "I kind of tend toward, well, not country but a rural thing," he said. "You can kind of hear it sometimes in a Nirvana, in things that aren't L.A. or New York or even Chicago, things that are a little more trashy or something. There's an aesthetic in that that I respond to because it's a little more organic."

"It's not musicianship exactly, it's like, 'explosiveness' or something. I don't know. It sounds kind of trite, but it's something that's really important, especially in music now."

Chris Whitley performs at the 7th House, 7 N. Saginaw, Pontiac, Thursday, March 23-Sunday, March 26. For more information, call (810) 335-8100.