

STREET BEATS

Paradise
— Mimi Harris and
the Snakes

In the course of just under an hour, Mimi Harris and her Snakes essay jazzy blues and bluesy rock with an ease and confidence that, under different circumstances (meaning: a major recording contract) would have put them all over the radio all over the country.

"Paradise" (Snake Den Records) is an extraordinary disc on a couple levels. With the kind of vocal elasticity that moves her agilely through the "adult rock" title piece, as comfortably as the Tom Waits-inspired beatnik motif of "Midnight," and the finger-snapping lops of "Snake Blues," Harris demonstrates decisively that no one in Detroit can touch her, for stylistic diversity at the very least.

Imagine a powerful Joan Armatrading with shades of Bonnie Raitt, a smidgen of Joplin and a taste of prime Peggy Lee thrown into a musical blender. Skip the comparisons, though. The bottom line is that Mimi Harris is The Voice in Detroit.

No mere "backup band," her Snakes rank among the most impressive in town, too. Listen to the Jeff Beck-meets-Hendrix stylings of "Twilight Bark," with Bill Cooper proving why he's long been considered one of the best guitarists in metro Detroit, and exceptional Hammond work from Jimmy Bones, for proof. This ranks as equal to anything I've heard this year from Ronnie Earl or Dave Specter, and there's more of the same on the Cooper showcase, "Cosmo Takes A Walk."

Outside of the instrumentals, there are all Mimi Harris originals, and there isn't a clinker in the lot. If there's a radio-ready single here, it's "Snake Blues," though with the caliber of material on the disc, that's not to infer that it's necessarily the best cut. "Strange Feeling" is a better vocal showcase and "Troubled Mind" is the kind of song that gets under the skin and makes a beeline for the goose-bump control center.

Mimi Harris has been in the local trenches for 20 years now, working solo gigs and fronting bands that have included heavyweights like Jim McCarty and Drew Abbot. There's never been a question that she should have been recorded and distributed nationally a long time ago. Maybe she needed to wait until now to have this superb band to work with. The elements are certainly in place.

(Mimi Harris and the Snakes play the "Blues in the Park" free concert in Kelllogg Park, downtown Plymouth, after 6 p.m. Friday, Sept. 29.)

—Mark E. Gallo

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

Rock 'n' Roll
— New York Dolls

Frequently hailed alongside Blondie, Talking Heads, and the Ramones as pioneers of America's punk scene in the '70s, the New York Dolls plainly had more in common with the raunch and swagger of the Rolling Stones than with the truly British bile of the Sex Pistols. Lead singer David Johansen, later known as the hard-core Buster Poindexter, looked and sounded like a hard-core Jagger wannabe, and his would-be Keith, guitarist Johnny Thunders, aped his idol too well and abused drugs until his death in 1991.

But this partnership, while derivative, spawned some truly great moments, most of which are included on the 20-song retrospective "Rock 'n' Roll" (Mercury): the piano-driven bluster of "Personality Crisis," the thunderous clapping intro to "Jet Boy," and the glam rock swagger of "Trash." Indeed, most of the great songs here are off the band's 1973 eponymous debut. However, the 10 remasters, unearthed demos and cuts off of their other album, "Too Much Too Soon," pale in comparison.

Since the Dolls only had two albums, who knows why Mercury Records didn't simply re-issue those or include everything and make this a double disc collection? The classic tale of "the Dolls" is excluded, and too many unmemorable songs are left in. "Rock 'n' Roll" is a great disc on its own, but anyone interested in America's answer to glam rock in the '70s would be better advised just to buy "New York Dolls."

—Todd Wicks

A Rochester Hills resident, Todd Wicks is a journalism student at Michigan State University.

Have a listen

To hear music by Blind Melon, Letters to Cleo, Del Amitri, Down, B11, Hentchmen, Mimi Harris and the Snakes, and Tuxteria, you can call the Street Beats 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.

Guitarist: 'Soup' good to last drop

BY CHRISTINA FUOCO
STAFF WRITER

Blind Melon guitarist Rogers Stevens has a few words for critics who say that the band's latest album, "Soup," encompasses every trait of the dreaded sophomore jinx — give it a thorough listen before writing about it.

"I think we're a band that is at a disadvantage with rock critics because we're not really a first listen sort of thing, and critics, they take one look at it and turn away in disgust. The ones who give it an actual chance will be rewarded for their effort," said guitarist Rogers Stevens via telephone from a Toronto hotel room.

On "Soup" Blind Melon left the fraternity party sing-alongs behind, instead expanding its repertoire to include bluesy ("Skinned") and acoustic self-exploratory songs ("Walk," "New Life").

"We don't really have a direction. We move all around and try different things. They're half-(baked) attempts at a lot of different kinds of music. That's why there's a lot of criticism. They think we're engaging in gratuitous eclecticism or whatever. In reality we don't really know how to do anything else."

Recording the album in New Orleans, once home to Stevens, also influenced the band. The intro and outro of the record are lazy New Orleans-style tributes.

"I'd been living in New Orleans for a couple of years, and there's a real atmosphere there. It's as if all these cultures were (brought together). There's your rednecks, your African culture, European culture, all these things are sort of swimming around the mouth of the Mississippi, and what comes out is murky sluggish mire of ambience that you just don't find anywhere else. It's the best city in America," said Stevens, who has since moved to Seattle — and regretted it.

Besides being stylistically different than "Blind Melon," "Soup" has a darker feel to it. Suicide, mass murder, and death are lead singer/guitarist Shannon Hoon's topics of choice. A visit to St. Andrew's Hall in Detroit three years ago prompted the song "St. Andrew's Fall."

"We were done playing. It was a good show, and everyone was celebrating. We were looking out those upstairs windows in the dressing room, and there was a crowd of people on the street. We thought there was some sort of fight or riot," Stevens said.



Returning to the scene: During a previous visit to St. Andrew's Hall in Detroit, Blind Melon saw a woman commit suicide by jumping out of a window at the nearby Omni Hotel. The band — from left, singer Shannon Hoon, guitarist Rogers Stevens, drummer/percussionist Glen Graham, guitarist Christopher Thorn, and bassist Brad Smith — penned a song about the experience and included "St. Andrew's Fall" on its latest album "Soup."

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guitarist Rogers Stevens

"We went outside and a girl was (about to jump from the Omni Hotel in Detroit). She jumped right in front of us. We were absolutely freaked out. Obviously we weren't as affected as she was, but it really freaked us for a long time on tour."

The reaction of the crowd haunted the band, Stevens said.

"She was up there for about 20 minutes. No one expected her to jump, and there were all these people in the streets yelling for her to jump. It was one of the sickest displays of

humanity I've ever seen."

"Galaxie," the upbeat first single from "Soup," has a happier feel to it. Ironically, Stevens sees the video as a farewell to unhappier times.

"This is sort of the tail end of a long period of debauchery for the band. When you're looking at that video, you're looking at the bitter remains of certain layer of brain cells," Stevens said.

When asked to elaborate, he said, "I'm not going into it. Everyone's much better now."

With album sales in the lurch, Blind Melon is hoping that its fall tour will boost sales. Wary of its draw, the band is playing smaller clubs like St. Andrew's Hall on Sunday, Sept. 24, to test the waters of its popularity.

"We've been away for awhile. They (audiences) have had ample opportunity to forget about us."

Stevens sees playing clubs as a plus, however.

"We actually come off much better in a club than we do in other situations that we found ourselves in. We're not really geared toward the athleticism of playing large venues. We're sort of weak in the knees."

Blind Melon performs at 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 24, at St. Andrew's Hall, 431 E. Congress, Detroit. Tickets are \$15 in advance for the all-ages show. For more information, call (313) 961-MELT. The band also performs Thursday, Sept. 21, on the David Letterman show.

Letters to Cleo spreads musical sunshine

BY CHRISTINA FUOCO
STAFF WRITER

It takes a lot to dampen the spirit of Boston alternapopsters Letters to Cleo. Even in the pouring rain and freezing cold, singer Kay Hanley dances like a nymph around the Pine Knob Music Theatre stage.

On and off stage, the effervescent singer and her equally spunky band are the musical sunshine in the clouds of dreary rock and angst-ridden performers.

"We've always been this big, fat, stupid pop band," Hanley said. "A goofy, smiley, happy loser pop band. People can, I think, relate to that."

If they couldn't relate to it, the constant airing of Letters to Cleo's breakthrough video "Here and Now" after last season's episodes of "Melrose Place" definitely beat it in audience heads.

Hanley's charming voice and faster-than-a-bullet singing style made the song the highlight of the "Melrose Place" soundtrack (Giant) and Letters to Cleo's independent release "Aurora Gory Alice." (If a translation of the song's 70 mile per hour chorus is still needed, here you go: "The comfort of a knowledge of a rise above the sky above could never parallel a here and now.")

Lyrically, Letters to Cleo turned the other cheek for "Wholesale Meats and Fish."

"Aurora Gory Alice" was serious in a way. We're not a serious band at all.



Alternapop stars: Boston's Letters to Cleo — from left bassist Scott Riebling, drummer Stacy Jones, guitarist Greg McKenna, vocalist Kay Hanley, and guitarist Michael Eisenstein — play Industry in Pontiac on Wednesday, Sept. 27, in support of their latest album "Wholesale Meats and Fish."

We had no idea where those songs came from," guitarist Michael Eisenstein explained while eyeing the season finale of "Beverly Hills 90210."

Hanley added that the new rhythm section of bassist Scott Riebling and drummer Stacy Jones was among the factors that influenced the songwriting on the new record.

"It's a year and a half of writing songs and growing up. We have a new

rhythm section including a new bass player who's a primary songwriter. We also had money. Last time that was something we didn't have," Hanley said.

Letters to Cleo performs with Fig Dish and the Dirt Merchants on Wednesday, Sept. 27, at Industry, 15 S. Saginaw, Pontiac. Doors open at 8 p.m. for the 18 and older show. Tickets are \$8 in advance. For more information, call (810) 334-1999.

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