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Rob Evans presents...

AOR

underground

Your monthly guide to what's hot and what's not on the underground melodic rock scene

With a plethora of quality releases at hand, this issue's column is another lush affair, one that is awash with the kind of AOR that's been hand-picked for your delectation. From the obscure to the well-loved and liked, it's all contained in these two pages. An album that will surely be one of the year's finest would have to be **Ronny Lee's** superb *'Original Retro'*. Little is known about Mr Lee, but that will all be rectified by next issue when we deliver the full skinny on your next favourite AOR star. With the news that the mighty **Seven** have reformed and recorded an album for Escape, it's been, as our American friends would say, another doozy of a month.

Having released their debut album on '08, Finnish AORsters **Free Spirit** return with a splendid sophomore outing in the shape of *'All The Shades Of Darkened Light'*. An eleven-track romp, it will come across like a **Def Leppard** greatest hits package, such is their similarity. With the likes of **Grand Design** and **Loud Lion** doing this kind of thing, and doing it well, it would have to be something special to rival either outfit. And special it is, let me tell you. They've captured the eighties **Def Leppard** sound to a tee, almost to the point of cloning Sheffield's finest. Like **Reckless Love**, they've managed to inject the right amount of originality into an old formula and come up with something that although it isn't new, it is damn easy on the ears. They showed an awful lot of promise on their debut, but this trumps it and then some. This is one of the best releases this month, trust me.

Over at Escape they've put together a package that will take some beating this year. The band is **Diesel**, the album is called *'Into The Fire'*, and it happens to be one of the best things I've heard this month. Putting **Robert Hart** together with **Jim Kirkpatrick (FM)** was a masterstroke, and the end results speak for themselves. With **Steve Overland** on

backing vocals, it's not a million miles away from the recent **Overland** album, only with more of a blues edge to it. As with **FM**, Kirkpatrick plays up a storm on this album; he must surely be one of this country's most underrated players? He's injected flair into recent **FM** material and on this form it's easy to see why. This is British hard rock at its absolute finest. Eat it up, people.

Whatever guise they are under, whether it is **Square One** or **Someone Else's Life**, the Aussie melodic rockers **The Radio Sun** have always delivered quality albums. The core duo of **Jason Old (Safire)** and **Steve Janevski** have, from their days in **Square One**, been right at the heart of things until the present day. In the past they've been renowned for their tight, lush harmonies, and nothing's changed on this album. Entitled *'Wrong Things Right'*, it's been produced by **Paul Laine** and will rate highly with lovers of their past works. Just one listen to the likes of *'World's Crazy Now'*, *'Julie'* and the irresistible *'Summer Girl'* and you'll be caught – hook, line and sinker. Like their past works, this is the perfect soundtrack to hot summers and lazy



days. It's available via www.melodicrockrecords.com. Whilst there has not exactly been an abundance of Czech AOR bands to come my way, in fact I can't think of any of the top of my head, there is one that did recently take me totally by surprise. Called **Black Tiger**, they've just

released a fabulous five-track EP and there's not a **Y&T** cover in sight! The opening couplet of *'Run'* and *'Caroline'* are immense slabs of AOR, both uplifting and surging, that contain a fine balance of guitars and keys, with the latter having an irresistible chorus and hook line. Getting **Dan Reed** to help out on the balladic *'Peace In Your Heart'* will raise their profile, whilst *'Higher Than We Can'* is a fantastic end to a great EP.

A nice little reissue of *'Warriors Of Love'* by **Gideon's Army** comes your way this month courtesy of Retroactive Records. Formed in '73, it would be nearly a decade later before they released their debut album in '82. With a further three years until this, their sophomore album, hit the stores, they weren't the most prolific of bands. Originally only ever available on vinyl, *'Warriors Of Love'* is very much of its time and, if I'm honest, hasn't aged that well. If you like bands such as **Servant**, **The Rez Band** or early **Sweet Comfort Band**, then you will find plenty to like on this release. This is one for completists or die-hard Christian AOR fans only, I'm afraid.

Whilst **Paul Sabu** is best remembered for his eighties output, some of his nineties material gets criminally overlooked as a result. An album that best sums up the nineties for **Sabu** would have to be his recently reissued self-titled album from '96. Hooking up with a couple of ex-**Bonfire** members –

Joerg Deisinger and **Angel Schlieffer** – this was a meeting of metal minds. The end results are akin to a **Y&T** album, with **Sabu** sounding not that dissimilar to **Dave Meniketti** in places. The likes of *'Cherie'*, *'End Of An Era'* and *'Cry Of A Thousand Hearts'* will appeal immensely, whilst the rest of the album won't be too far behind.

Santa Cruz returns with a brand new single, *'We Are The Ones To Fall'*. A non-album track, it's a riotous romp of guitar driven hard rock, the kind that they've built their reputation with. If you've not checked out this young bunch of Finns, then this is the prefect jump-on point. Their album, *'Screaming For Adrenaline'*, is still available and is a must buy if you are into modern day hair metal and glam. The mighty **FM** return with another of their value-for-money EPs. Entitled *'Futurama'*, it weighs in at eleven tracks and features four brand new songs. Of which the likes of *'Futurama'* and *'Cold Hearted'* come replete with the usual **FM** trademarks, whilst *'Bad That's Good In You'* is a blues-based rocker. But it's the stripped back splendour of *'Preying On My Mind'*

that stands head and shoulders above the rest, a spine tingling future set pleaser for sure. Talking of set pleasers, there are six tracks taken from their recent live show at The Box, Crewe. The like of *'Tough Love'* rubs shoulders alongside *'Closer To Heaven'* and *'Crosstown Train'*. With an extended remix of *'Cold Hearted'* thrown in for good measure, this is a wallet pleasing collection of great music.

I had the pleasure of catching up with **Jono** guitarist, and current six-stringer for **Within Temptation**, **Stefan Helleblad** at the recent WT show in Manchester. We discussed all things **Jono** at the aftershow, with Stefan confirming that the style of their debut will be continued when they record their forthcoming new album. Well, if their new songs are

anything to go by, then it'll certainly be business as usual. The likes of *'Can We Make It'* would have sat proudly on **Queen's** *'Innuendo'*, whilst *'Turn Around'* is a piano led ballad that is very reminiscent of **Lostalone**. If this is the evidence, then album number two will push this band to the forefront.

A double dose of **Julian Angel** is up next as we peruse, *'Kick Down The Barricades'*, his latest outing with **Beautiful Beast** and his contribution to Vitne's *'Neon'* album. With **Beautiful Beast**, Angel wears his heart on his sleeve and unashamedly worships at the altar of all things eighties; it's like **Steel Panther** only the humour is unintentional. This is their third release and I have to say that they are getting progressively better, but they are hardly going to set the world on fire.

As a member of the Norwegian record firm **Seks**, the man that is **Vitne** recorded a dreadful little album and, if I'm honest, *'Neon'* isn't that far behind. The pairing of **Vitne** and **Angel** is, incredulously, being described in some quarters as a modern day **Billy Idol** and **Stevie Stevens**. Whilst **Angel** is no **Stevens**, he does know his way around a guitar, **Vitne**, on the other hand, couldn't carry a tune if it was in a suitcase. A flat vocal delivery is only one part of the problem; couple it with an album full of shambolic songs and you've a recipe for disaster. Avoid, like the plague!

The sweet sounds of **Justin Lerner** are washing over the New Jersey shoreline via his debut EP, *'18th Avenue'*. A six-track affair, it showcases Lerner's love of all things Springsteen and **Bon Jovi**. Not that dissimilar to what **Blue Tears** were doing on their *'Innocent Ones'* album, Lerner has a knack for carrying a great tune. You can imagine him belting these songs out at the **Stone Pony** or some other legendary New Jersey venue, entrancing the crowd effortlessly with the likes of *'18th Avenue'*, *'Summer Days Ain't Over'* and *'Not This Time'*. This guy has massive potential and will appeal to fans of **Highway 9**, **Ghost Poets** and **Blue Tears**. Have a look at www.justinlernermusic.com.

One of my most endearing images of LA metal queen **Ann Boleyn** was that of her on the back cover of **Hellion's** six track debut EP – flanked by her band, looking like she was holding them back – an image that put her up there with the likes of **Lee Aaron** and **Doro Pesch** in my book. With **Cherry Red** releasing a brand new Anthology, *'To Hellion And Back'*, it's the perfect time to get reacquainted with this most endearing of metal quintets. Spread over two CDs, this anthology covers all the bases. From the debut EP right up to their present-day incarnation, it's all included here. Personally, I love their debut EP; it show cases a band that should have done so much more.

The Brazilian outfit **Pleaser** have the kind of style and look that belongs on the sunset strip circa '89. Their debut album, *'One Night In Paradise'*, is full of the kind of cliché ridden rubbish that destroyed hair metal in the first place. From the cover art to the woeful lyrical content, this is the kind of album that would make

Steel Panther sound like **Dream Theater**. The guitar playing is third division, the vocals are hackneyed and the whole thing just reeks of a poor man's **Guns N' Roses**.

Do you ever wonder why some bands bother? Surely they reach a point where they go, "Lads, this is shit – let's not bother anymore." Well, do they? In the case of **Roxin Palace** the answer is a big fat, no, they don't. From their half-

single and delivered some of the best music to come out of the States. It all started in '78 when a soft rocking, innocuous looking album spawned a top five hit in the shape of *'Hold The Line'*. A perennial song, it proved to be a real tour-de-force that springboarded the band to bigger and better things.

By the time of their sophomore album, *'Hydra'*, the band were in full swing as their brand of pomp



assured image, to the ludicrous band names – step forward **Slaver**, **Hell**, **Crown** and **Axel** – this album is doomed before they even play a note. Once again, like the **Pleaser** album, this is hair metal by numbers and does nothing more than irritate me to the point of distraction. Oh well, at least now I have a matching pair of silver coasters.

Over at Frontiers the new **Winger** album, *'Better Day's Comin'*, has caught my attention, which, considering they contain two of the rudest men in rock, is no mean feat. Still, it's all about the music, right? And this sounds quite good in my humble opinion. The titular *'Better Day's Comin'* is a particularly pleasant and very seventies inspired song, whilst *'Midnight Driver Of A Love Machine'* is just like the **Winger** of old. Of particular beauty is the track *'Ever Wonder'*, which sounds like it could have come from any of **Kip's** solo albums. This is a great album, a real slow-burner that will have a long lasting appeal.

Also on Frontiers is *'Gravitas'*, the new album from **Asia**, and its business as usual. If I'm honest, I think that **Asia** have past their sell-by date and made a huge mistake in getting rid of **John Payne**. That guy had a certain class and brought excitement to what had become a dull band. Old school fans will take to *'Gravitas'* with ease, whilst the rest of us will feel a familiar deja-vu about the whole thing. It's big, grandiose and very, very blandiose.

Over at Rock Candy they've decided to re-release the first three albums from that most revered of AOR outfits, **Toto**. Despised in the mainstream press, **Steve Lukather** and company have ridden the storm and stuck two fingers up at their detractors by having a career that spans thirty-five years. In that time they've grabbed Grammy awards, suffered personal tragedies, had number

tee and built a career out of delivering down and dirty hard rock to the youth of America.

The immeasurably talented **Alain Conception** is the kind of AOR artist that could go quite far. He released an EP awhile back, which was most notable for its **Benny Mardones** cover, and is just about to release his debut album, *'R'*. It's packed full of the kind of AOR that fans of **David Saylor** will adore. I mean, just check out the album's opener, *'If I'm Losing You'*, for all the proof you'll need. He does like his covers, as tracks from **Journey**, **Michael McDonald** and **Luther Vandross** will testify, but let's take nothing away from this talented AOR star, as *'R'* is a slick, gold-plated album that is rich in talent and has class in abundance. There have been several classy releases from Spain recently; this will sit nicely at the top of the pile.

Austrian melodic rockers **Badhoven** have been around for quite a few years in one guise or another. Starting life as **Black Rose**, they released two rather non-descript CDs before changing their name to **Badhoven** in '01, when they released *'Behind The Masquerade'*. Several albums later and they've arrived at their current opus, *'Obsession'*. Whilst I've never been a massive fan of this outfit, I've always admired their spirit and dedication to their cause. If I'm honest, I was expecting very little from this album, but I have to add that it took me totally by surprise. It's certainly their best work by a country mile; it's also quite possibly one of the best AOR CDs to come from an Austrian band. The likes of *'She's So Beautiful'*, *'My Brothers Red Guitar'* and *'Rock You Hard'* are prime examples of a band at the top of their game. Have a look at www.badhoven.com.

As we sign off for this month, it just leaves me to tell you not to forget our Facebook page. This month we have the usual playlist, as well as a whole slew of videos from the world of AOR. It's the perfect accompaniment to the pages of **AOR Underground**. You can check it out at www.facebook.com/Aorunderground.

Here's the playlist. 1. **Ronny Lee** *'Original Retro'* (Well, what a find this little beauty is. I have no idea who **Ronny Lee** is, but he's made one of the best albums this month.) 2. **LaValle** *'Dear Sanity'* (One of the best hair metal albums you'll hear all year.) 3. **Lost Alone** *'Shapes Of Screams'* (Derby's finest band return with more **Queen**-like harmonies, all wrapped around twelve seriously catchy songs.) 4. **Baby Snakes** *'Gunslingers'* (A fabulously bombastic sleaze rock album, which ticks all the right boxes.) 5. **Raspberry Park** *'Scratching The Surface'* (Another quality Swedish AOR outfit that are having plaudits heaped on them by the bucket load.) And on that note, I'll see you all back here next month.

Coming next issue: the wonderful **Ronny Lee**, **Kjetil By** and **LaValle**, plus one new acts in the shape of **Raspberry Park**, **Baby Snakes** and **Art Nation**, and reissues from **Fiona** and **Kerry Livgren**.

Keep those emails coming to aorundergroundrob@myspace.com.