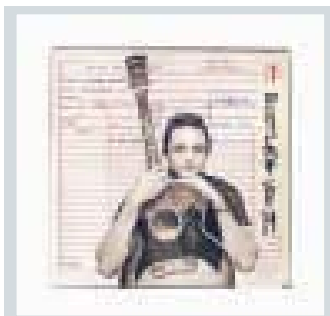


Thanks for the agony



Adam Woods

CDS



Johnny Cash
Bootleg Volume II
Sony, out now
★★★★★

Johnny Cash wasn't the faint-hearted kind; he once picked a fight with a noisy ostrich on his farm and suffered injuries that nearly killed him.

But he obviously didn't like to say no to radio producers, who had him advertising everything from awnings to kitchens when he played live on Memphis radio in 1955.

Such things you do when you're starting out, and this second set of rarities from the Cash archive records the fact.

The endorsements initially disrupt the flow of these rare sessions and demos, recorded when the future Man In Black still wore a variety of colours.

But simple, sonorous takes on early signature tunes (I Walk The Line, Big River) sit alongside bad-man tales (Hardin Wouldn't Run, Five Minutes To Live) and old folk chestnuts.

Even if Cash's early style is almost over-familiar, these are important items from when country and rock 'n' roll were only beginning to diverge.





Primal Scream
Screamadelica
Sony, out tomorrow
★★★★★

Two decades since Screamadelica crunched together acid house, Southern soul, gospel, rock 'n' roll and druggy dub – or rather, threw all those styles separately at the same wall – you can find Primal Scream's finest moment for about the price of a bus ticket in most record shops.

Alternatively, you may like to sample it as a new £100 box set, which collects remixes, live recordings, LPs, a T-shirt, a documentary and the contemporary Dixie Narco EP, packaged in what looks like a big red cake tin.

Somewhere on the near side of

the yawning financial chasm between the two is this two-disc remastered version, with just the album and the EP in all their wonky, accidental glory.

Screamadelica still sounds like a haywire compilation tape. Is there any other classic album on which the non-singing guitarist impersonates the singer for an entire song, as Robert 'Throb' Young does on Slip Inside This House?

Bobby Gillespie, apparently, was too 'refreshed' to stand at the microphone.

They were certainly interesting times.

Both an album title and a band, Majestic Silver Strings are an inspired grouping of restless guitar-slinging sidemen, comprising experimental type Marc Ribot, jazz explorer Bill Frisell, pedal-steel virtuoso Greg Leisz and initiator Buddy Miller, who has worked with Robert Plant and Emmylou Harris.

Convening at Buddy's house in January 2010 with the idea of

Buddy Miller
Majestic Silver Strings

New West, out tomorrow

★★★★★

'messing up old country songs', they ransacked the songbook and came up with a pile of obscurities and a handful of new ones.

Weaving the silvery strands of Leisz's pedal steel through Frisell's

spidery playing and Ribot's spiky oddness, the Strings create an alternative universe of country music – woozy and dreamlike on Cattle Call, wild and haunted on Bury Me Not On The Lone Prairie.

Not insignificantly, Emmylou, Shawn Colvin, Lee Ann Womack and others lend further voices, and Harris's luminous Why I'm Walkin' just about justifies the whole fine venture on its own.





The Unthanks
Last
EMI, out tomorrow
★★★★★

How do you recommend The Unthanks to someone who only knows folk music by the cliché of bearded men singing songs about drownings? After all, sisters Rachel and Becky Unthank sing about troubled love, hard toil and infant death in steam-age Geordie dialect. All you can say is: yes, but they're still really good. Mercury Prize judges agreed, when they shortlisted their 2007 album *The Bairsns*.

Known for three previous albums as Rachel Unthank And The Winterset, The Unthanks rise gracefully above the cheap laughs, and *Last* again shows why: they make deeply-felt, austere beautiful music with deep roots and an appetite for something new.

Of course, it isn't front-loaded with radio-friendly singles. *Gan To The Kye*, one of several ancient songs they treat to stately arrangements, is a wintry

lament about a hard farming life. We learn a calf has died in the first verse, a father in the second. You'll have to take my word for the fact that a funereal string arrangement makes up for it.

Likewise, their cover of late North-Eastern songwriter Alex Glasgow's *Close The Coalhouse Door* is more liable to provoke shudders than chuckles. Over a rangy piano, the sisters intone a darkly allusive tale of the human cost of coal mining that would be grim if it weren't so riveting.

But *Last* is folk music that doesn't want to live in isolation. There are covers of Tom Waits and King Crimson, and the textured arrangements of Rachel's husband Adrian McNally have drawn comparisons to modern composers such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass. The Unthanks give folk music a good name.





Pet Shop Boys
The Most Incredible Thing
Parlophone, out tomorrow
★★★★★

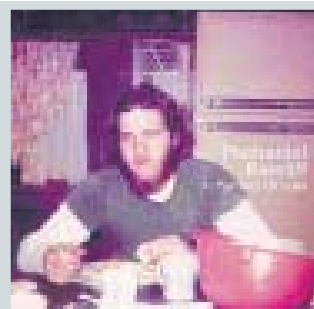
The Pet Shop Boys are known to have a theatrical leaning: in 2001, they co-wrote a musical, *Closer To Heaven*, and four years later they created a new score for Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 silent film, *Battleship Potemkin*.

Their first ballet, *The Most Incredible Thing*, based on the Hans Christian Andersen tale and opening this week in London, is their first foray into high culture.

It's no particular criticism to say that its score sounds very much like you would expect a Tennant and Lowe ballet to sound. The tunes are promisingly big, occasionally reprising some familiar melodies and mixing electronic beats with symphonic swirls and crescendos.

On its own, the score obviously lacks the dramatic focus the spectacle will presumably provide, and those hoping for a few vocal pop numbers should know there are none.

All the same, it feels fairly intriguing.



Nathaniel Rateliff
In Memory Of Loss
Rounder, out now
★★★★★

Pained singer-songwriters often only cause further pain, though that doesn't seem to stop them sharing.

Nathaniel Rateliff sounds like he might be one, and all right, he is, but he's one of the exceptions for whom you sift through the chaff.

For one thing, he occasionally calls on a fuzzily forceful band to give extra thrust to his mordant little songs.

For another, he examines sadness and conflict without wallowing in it, sounding wise rather than miserable.

And he has lovely tunes with clever touches, like the deep hum of the backing vocals at the end of the otherwise solo *We Never Win* or the happy, wind-blown strum of *A Lamb On The Stone*.

Amid hot competition in the weebegone troubadour game, he feels like a word-of-mouth success waiting to happen.

