



Songs of Faith and Devotion
Depeche Mode
(Warner)

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These guys have really come a long way. Since adding an ominous ambience to their music, Depeche Mode have improved to the point where 1990's *Violator* was all right. *Songs of Faith and Devotion* appears to be the band's vie for REM/U2 status. The U2 likeness is inescapable -- it's coproduced by Flood and even features a booklet that looks an awful lot like that of *Achtung Baby* -- but it's an unflattering comparison for the Depeche boys as *Songs* lacks the emotional substance that made *Achtung* a classic. Depeche Mode can't seem to shake their synthetic roots.

This stuff is almost visionary for the first five tracks. "I Feel You" actually rocks, or successfully emulates the act; "Judas" climaxes with a haunting chant; "Mercy in You" has a U2-ish sweep; "Condemnation" is actually gospel-tinged. This highly unlikely gospel influence pops up on the album a few times. I find the effect -- a computer with the blues -- charming. The second half has its moments ("Rush," "Get Right With Me"), but is generally dull. Either that or I just got bored.

But even at their best, Depeche Mode still sound robotic, probably due to the singer's empty vocalizing, the pinging drum machines and the generally manipulative nature that it takes to make their music. Despite the imagination and ambition of *Songs of Faith and Devotion*, they can't hide the mechanical heart that beats at the centre of this band.

If you're a fan, this is undoubtedly the best thing they've ever done. For the rest of us, *Songs of Faith and Devotion* is a failure, though its sonic impact may actually make it worth your money.



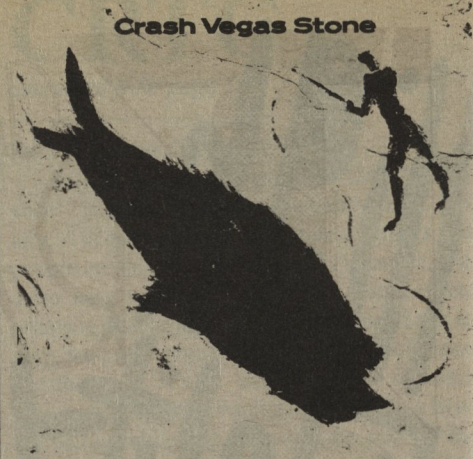
Coverdale/Page
(MCA)

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Jimmy Page is getting notorious for his bad taste in vocalists. 1988's *Outrider*, an earth-shaking collection of some remarkably fresh riffs, was marred by some headsplitting singing. For his latest effort, Page recruits former Whitesnake mic-stand humper, David Coverdale, a remarkably stupid man and a really strident singer too. It's hard to imagine what exactly Page hears in these guys; I can just imagine him turning down perfectly good blues belters: "Sorry, you're just not quite castrated-sounding enough." At his worst, as on "Whisper a Prayer For the Dying," Coverdale sounds just like the AC/DC guy. At his best he bears a comfortable resemblance to Robert Plant. Not being familiar with the Whitesnake *oeuvre*, I don't know what Coverdale used to sound like, but he generally sounds shredded here. So anyway, when Coverdale lets this god-awful screech go on that "Whisper" song, I think he actually gave me a nosebleed... is that possible? But really, I'm exaggerating Coverdale's relevance -- he's actually quite easy to ignore -- but he's my heavy metal scapegoat.

Despite playing with a handicap, Page makes a tasty treat out of some pretty tasteless ingredients. Though *Coverdale/Page* frequently sounds like your usual heavy metal schlock, Page's guitar texturing and sharp arranging skills -- the kind of stuff yer normal HM bonehead could never pull off -- make this far more enjoyable than most people will likely ever admit. Artful it is not, but if you just sit back and let the enormous riffage flatten your medulla oblongata, you'll have some fun.

And it's Page/Coverdale.



Stone
Crash Vegas
(Polygram)

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Crash Vegas have a sound of some potential, but their songwriting is forgettable and the singing characterless. The first three tracks work fine, especially "One Way Conversation" -- which they didn't write, unfortunately. I can't tell you a thing about the rest of it, except that the Butch Vig mixed cut, "Nothing Ever Happened," has a riff that sounds like "Teen Spirit" at half speed. Nonetheless, the first three tracks are impressive; they're both melancholy and joyous, subtle and rocking -- inspiring stuff. I really wish the rest was more interesting. Unless you're a nationalist, you can safely pass this one by.

The Boxed Life
Henry Rollins
(BMG)

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What is the point of a comedy album? You play it once for yourself, a couple more times for your friends, then that's it. Having said that I think the genre is a gip, Henry Rollins' *The Boxed Life* manages to stand up to repeated listenings. Variety is added with his poetry and phone messages from an insane fan (and if you can make out what he's saying you're a better person than I am). Contrary to what you may think, Rollins is a fairly conventional stand-up comedian, but his subject matter is wonderfully strange: working in an animal testing laboratory, what men really do with their used condoms and the value of depression among them.

Like all great comedy, it's the undercurrent of torment, angst and truth that makes *The Boxed Life* so resonant. Whether you want to buy it or not is your business.

above reviews by Kirby Ferguson