

Discussions -- Jay Dunner

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QUOTE OF NOTE: "Once you've been on a stage with a couple of guys and looked into the whites of the audience members' eyes and tried to perform something they think is courageous or intelligent or funny, and then received applause for it, you've bonded – like warriors." (Bill Bruford, drummer, Yes / King Crimson / ...)

"I am doing what I love to do, and you cannot beat that, especially when the audience appreciates what you prepare for them. It's very, very gratifying." (Aretha Franklin)

DUNCAN SHEIK CLAPTRAP (Antifragile Music)

Without exception, a new Duncan Sheik album promises analytical lyrics that trace the convoluted threads of human relationships, embedded in a rich, deceptively understated music setting built on a myriad of subtle riffs, special effects, and sequenced magic. On the self-deprecatingly titled Claptrap (the Montclair, NJ native's first pop album in seven years), Sheik shakes nuggets of wisdom into a rich, home-brewed, totally solo stew of guitars, electronics, and intriguingly layered vocals. Opening with "Experience," and its exhortations of "I'm ready" and "jump up," he sets the album's theme of a search for enlightenment, with a money-for-nothing riff that warms away any emotionally dire straits. In "Isn't It So," while a quiet marimba tone metronomes a mid-tempo flow, Sheik shares life as a series of storms and shows, and in "Smoke and Mirrors," he labels life as just that. Even in the languid "You'll Never Be Alone," awash in gorgeous delayed guitar figures, Sheik's assertions are tempered by an even acceptance of the transitory nature of reality. Throughout Claptrap, the echoes of the mystery and ache of Nick Drake are deafening, harmonized with the warmth and heart of Paul McCartney, and even a dash of Dylan. This album hasn't left my player in weeks! I repeat my assessment of Sheik as one of the best-kept secrets in the world of singer-songwriters; Claptrap is his latest meticulously crafted gem. *****

THE ZOMBIES DIFFERENT GAME (Cooking Vinyl)

What do you do when there are five zombies staring at you? Hope it's Halloween – or -- put down the liner notes and start playing this latest installment of Colin Blunstone's and Rod Argent's major-minor pop-rock finery. The Zombies originally formed in 1961, broke up in '68 just before "Time of the Season" became their signature hit, re-formed briefly in the '80s, and then regrouped a third time in the '00s. Different Game is the band's 10th release, coincident with founding members Blunstone and Argent each turning 78 – and still sounding decades younger! Despite the opening title track's tumble into a paler shade of a Procol Harum hit, Argent quickly resurrects the band with a funky Rhodes riff that kick-starts the bluesy "Dropped Reeling & Stupid." The Zombies then take the beach with "Rediscover," surfing a good-vibrations choral harmony that segues into the melancholy "Runaway" and the piano-and-strings yearn of "You Could Be My Love." And then the gloves come off, as Argent's barrelhouse piano and Steve Rodford's drum fireworks give "Merry-Go-Round" a wicked, age-defying spin, later echoed by the harmonica-driven "Got to Move On." Blunstone delivers emotive pleas over Tom Toomey's fingerpicked guitar riff in "Love While You Can" and the shades-of-"Yesterday" Q Strings (quartet) in "I Want to Fly." The album's closing beacon of hope is "The Sun Will Rise Again," a gorgeous, plaintive expression of hope eternal. Now, when your girlfriend, wife, or mom asks if The Zombies aren't just a golden oldie, you can confidently tell her no, no, no, no, no-no-no-no, NO! ****

***** **Outstanding.** **** **Excellent.** *** **Good.** ** **Meh.** * **Ecch!**