

Songwriting at Its Best

Written by Tom Swanson
Tuesday, 13 May 2003 18:00

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As I was walking past our managing editor's desk, the first thing I noticed about Quad Cities veteran players Driver of the Year's latest EP, *Some Girls Would Say ...*, was the artwork. It's a plain black cover with a stylized green illustration of a nude woman lying with her head resting on the stomach of another nude woman. And I didn't notice it because of the subject matter – I couldn't even tell what it was at first – but because it was so fantastically simple, which seems to be indicative of everything that local label Future Appletree is releasing these days.

The newest showcase from Jason Parris (vocals, piano), Justen Parris (drums), Seth Knappen (guitars, organ), and Jamie Salsbury (bass, synths) is right in line with other acts on Future Appletree, namely Tenki and Marlboro Chorus. All three of these bands showcase basic riffs, great hooks, and very artful song-crafting in general, resulting in an uber-pop trademark sound that combines some of the best (and most obvious) influences from the icons of the '60s with innovative styling all their own. Perhaps the most satisfying thing about this, for me at least, is that it's very refreshing to see seasoned local musicians producing such topnotch material that is not solely influenced by the traditions of blues and jazz, something that the area is well known for and tends to produce a lot of.

Some Girls Would Say ... kicks off with an ever-reliable Beatlesque two-chord banging of the keys on "The Squeeler," underscored with a synth-bass line and a snappy tambourined beat, all of which is topped off with the first of many hooks to come; Jason Parris proclaims over the "woo"s on the chorus, "You can't stop fucking up / But the folks won't get you off / You're a page turnin', girl."

But that's where similarities in influences that Driver of the Year shares with its labelmates begin to wane a bit. "Sunburst Finish" starts with a raucous beat that gets soaked with syncopated synth and bass lines intertwining and bursting into a staccato chorus, eventually morphing into a breakdown lead-out indicative of something that you'd expect to hear from Rush.

The album continues to pull you in with those sweet poppy riffs, but then invariably makes you think again with the push and pull of angst-peppered, dissonant choruses, breakdowns, and

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outros that are uncomfortable at first, but soon become addicting and pleasurable. “On This Stage” begins with that same familiar two-chord keyboard intro that you hear on “The Squeeler” but refuses to re-use the feel-good “woo”s and instead breaks into Parris screaming vehemently, “If she thinks this while she dies ... on this stage tonight.” Then, almost in spite of the turbulence you’ve just endured, they throw you right back into the satisfaction of the four-chord guitar chunk of “Rock & Roll Revolution.”

With its latest work, *Driver of the Year* uses a smart “Hey I’ve heard this song before ... I *think*” formula throughout to pull unsuspecting listeners in before turning around and revealing its true colors – songwriting at its best. The clever reference of the first line of “Stuck Up Drunk” – a blatant shout-out to The Cars’ “Drive” – is a great example: “Who’s gonna drive you home tonight? / ‘Cause with a mouth like yours it sure as hell ain’t me.” The seven-song EP finishes up with the infectious and upbeat romp “Rewind Sometime” and the guitar-soaked ’70s stadium-rock anthem “Cheap Ass Wine” for its closer.

Some Girls Would Say ... is the latest example of the fine products Future Appletree is releasing from its artists. Excellent songwriting that doesn’t take itself too seriously is a welcome addition to a regional scene so steeped in traditional influences. The label has started with a bang, showcasing strong debuts and new releases from talented local and regional acts, and *Driver of the Year*’s latest is no exception. Future Appletree will get the word about these artists to the rest of the world, but we can still claim them as our own. Consider yourself fortunate to be able to say you knew who they were before everyone else caught on.

Driver of the Year will play with Seth Knappen on Friday, May 23, and the Quad Cities Brew & View.

Driver of the Year’s *Some Girls Would Say ...* was released on Tuesday. Future Appletree’s next release will be Seth Knappen’s *Leaving Sound* on May 27. All Future Appletree releases can be found at Co-op Records and can be ordered online at (<http://www.parasol.com>). For more information on Future Appletree, visit (<http://www.futureappletree.com>).