

Hard RoxX 2 is a **FREE** weekly internet magazine for lovers of rock music. To receive your copy every week, e-mail Matthew at hardroxxhoney@aol.com

HR2 #12 Contents

	Page
New Reviews	1
Horizon	1
Orphan	1
Stiff Little Fingers	2
Eclipse	2
Evil Masquerade	3
Crossfade	3
Wicked Sensation	4
Nocturnal Rites	4
Reissue Roundup	5
Contact Details	5

NEW REVIEWS



HORIZON **Worlds Apart** **Massacre Records PC 0409**

A Franco/German symphonic/progressive power metal band (not to be confused with the similarly named, early 80's Dutch mob), Horizon made their debut appearance about two years ago now with the rather impressive 'The Sky's The Limit' album. Offering a brooding, symphonic cocktail of Adagio, Royal Hunt and Silent Force (with a clearly discernable, and highly evocative Scandie edge to it) it came from seemingly out of nowhere, laying waste to all but the most steadfast of opposition as it staked a near unassailable claim to the number one spot in most 'debut of the year' polls.

Still operating as a trio, Horizon is very much the brainchild of vocalist/multi-instrumentalist Patrick Henner, who along with drummer Krissy Friedrich, writes, plays and produces just about everything you can hear (although once again the final mastering was done by Achim Kohler, the same guy responsible for sonic dynamite from the likes of Primal Fear).

With former keyboard player Vinnie Angelo walking soon after the release of 'The Sky's The Limit', Henner and Friedrich wasted little time in finding a replacement in the shape of J.P. "Giam" Giraldi, and between them they've cooked up another intoxicating brew which if anything, goes one better than last time.

The first thing likely to catch the ear of anyone new to Horizon is Henner's prowess as a guitarist, his scything riffs and searing solo's stamping their authority all over proceedings right from the get go – just check out the awesome wall of feedback that is instrumental track 'The Black Mark', and you'll see exactly what I mean, the guy is literally on fire! As a vocalist too he's improved quiet a lot since last time out. Ok, Glenn Hughes or Paul Rodgers he probably ain't, but he can more than carry a tune, and

his delivery has a sort of soul tinged flavour which immediately elicits empathy from the listener – no mean feat these days I can tell you.

The album opens with a moody keyboard piece which quickly gives way to a fistful of guitar flurries, themselves soon supplanted by a thunderous, double bass drum augmented monster of a riff. This ladies and gentlemen is 'Burning Hunger', a sprawling, angst fuelled roller-coaster which reminded me of Malmsteen at his bombastic best. Then it's a shift down a gear or two for the Symphony X inspired effervescence of 'Always A Stranger', crushingly heavy riffs allied to a chorus and main vocal melody that has a classic Scandie thread running straight through the middle of it. After such an impressive opening double whammy, Horizon then lull you into a false sense of security with the poignant, hauntingly beautiful intro to 'Edge Of Insanity', before the tumultuous riffs once again deliver that knockout killer punch.

By now you're probably under the impression that Horizon are all about high octane, balls to the wall songs with little thought towards something more eclectic and enigmatic, but one listen to the plaintive 'When The Night Falls' will soon dispel such thoughts. Imagine a classic Scorpions ballad given the Vandenberg treatment, throw in a few decidedly Gary Moore like licks, and you're half-way there – arresting stuff indeed! Elsewhere there's the slow burning 'Hell Or High Water', the pulsating 'Mercy', the sheer animal brutality of 'Brainwashed', and the closing guitar fest 'S & M'.

After such a bright start with 'The Sky's The Limit', I half expected 'Worlds Apart' to be an album of consolidation, but no, Horizon are far more ambitious than that. A bit of a cracker and no mistake!
9/10 **Dave Cockett**

ORPHAN **Lonely At Night/Salute** **Escape Music ESM097**

With the demand for ever more obscure reissues becoming increasingly insatiable at the

moment, there's a growing number of labels who seem eager to grab themselves a slice of the pie. Some do their best to give you (the customer) a fair deal, whilst there are others who are blatant rip off merchants, issuing product which is little different to a bunch of MP3's downloaded from the web, with no thought given to packaging or presentation beyond parting you from your cash. However, when it comes to all round quality and value for money, there's no one to touch the guys at Escape Music – just look at the top notch jobs they've done with Sugarcreek, FM, and more recently, the wonderful Zon.

Latest band to get the full on Escape treatment are semi-obscure Canadian AOR/pop rockers Orphan who released a couple of respectable albums through Portrait in the mid 80's. Originally known as The Pumps (an epithet under which they issued a solitary album, 'Gotta Move', for PolyGram at the dawn of the 80's), Orphan were a rather hi-tech (by the standards of the day at any rate) AOR four piece who could be likened to a mixture of more traditional bands like Loverboy and Honeymoon Suite, and the slightly more avant-garde new wave sounds of Detective, Body Electric and Missing Persons.



Produced by Lance Quinn (of Bon Jovi fame) debut effort 'Lonely At Night' first saw the light of day back in 1983, yet remarkably it still sounds surprisingly fresh and crisp after more than twenty years. An eclectic mixture of punchy, upbeat rockers and tasteful ballads, it has similar pop/rock sensibilities to bands such as the aforementioned Missing Persons and Body Electric (as well as several more mainstream chart acts), yet the

brash, upfront guitar work of Steve McGovern pushes it in a much more AOR oriented direction. From the swaggering opener 'Lonely At Night' – love the innovative keyboard work of Brent Diamond – through the Balance like 'Saved By The Bell' or the emotive weepie 'Miracle', to the heady atmospherics of funk fuelled closer 'Night Parade', 'Lonely At Night' offers a fascinating window into a band who were way ahead of their time.



Two years and a change of drummer later (the outgoing Ron Boisvenue making way for original Pumps man Terry Norman Taylor), and Orphan emerged once more with their sophomore effort 'Salute'. Produced this time by British duo Jon Astley and Phil Chapman, it has a cleaner, more traditional AOR sound – less new wave and slightly more akin to the hi-tech pomp sound then being tested by bands like Refugee, Urgent, and Illusion. Although noticeably different sound wise to the debut, for me it's the stronger of the two albums, the general level of consistency achieved in the songwriting showcase a band who had finally found their niche after many years of soul searching. Featuring a fistful of knockout, hooky melodies, tracks such as 'Open Up The Skies', 'Crazy For The Night', the swaggering 'Steel And Iron' (with a guest appearance from Aldo Nova no less), or 'A Little Heart And Soul', still stand tall and proud as minor league classics to this day.

Now fully remastered and presented in the kind of superb packaging we've come to expect from Escape, both Orphan albums are an essential addition to the collections of serious scholars of the era.

8/10 **Dave Cockett**

STIFF LITTLE FINGERS Flags & Emblems Get A Life Sanctuary Records

It seems like I just can't get away from Stiff Little Fingers. No sooner have I reviewed their excellent new album 'Guitar And Drum' and witnessed yet another cracking live show, than Sanctuary decide to chuck out another couple of re-releases. Oh well, I think I can live with it.



Although both albums are of the high quality associated with SLF, 'Get A Life' is pipped at the post by 'Flags & Emblems', a 1991 release that saw the band reform after an acrimonious spilt a few years before, recruiting former Jam bassist Bruce Foxton to replace Ali McMordie, who was unable to complete the album due to other commitments.



Both albums display that talents of a band who don't know when to call it a day, and rightly so. In Jake Burns, they have a songwriter of vision and talent who can make a tear come to your eye whilst turning the guitars up and wailing like a tuneful air raid siren. This talent is evident to the fullest effect on 'Flags & Emblems' 'Each Dollar A Bullet', a searing look at all the shite that the Northern Irish have to put up with,

shite that they are as much to blame for as everyone else (according to Jake).

If either of these albums had been released today, they would still stand above much of the soulless tat that passes for hard rock in some corners of the world. Even if you already own copies, these remastered beauties are worth forking out for, as both have extras unavailable elsewhere. 'Flags & Emblems' has a remix of 'The Cosh', coupled with a very good interview with Jake that sheds some light on the John McCarthy inspired 'Beirut Moon'. 'Get A Life' doesn't have an interview, but makes up for it with nine additional tracks, including three unplugged and two live.

Sanctuary are to be congratulated for bringing these albums to life again, and if you're one of the people (like me) who is a new, rather than old fan of the band, these will sit perfectly alongside the likes of 'Tinderbox' and 'Hope Street' as top examples of forceful melodic hard rock.

Flags & Emblems 8/10
Get A Life 7/10
Alan Holloway



ECLIPSE Second To None Frontiers Records FR CD 183

A young Stockholm based band (from their publicity photo's vocalist and main man Erik Martensson looks positively pre-pubescent!), Eclipse were formed about four or five years ago. After a few months writing and rehearsing, the band – then just a three piece - cut a four track demo which brought them to the attention of UK based Z Records.

A deal was quickly struck, and the highly acclaimed debut album 'The Truth And A Little More' followed in the summer of 2001.

Since the release of that debut three years ago, a lot of water has passed under the bridge for Eclipse, not least being the loss of co-founder and keyboard player Anders Berlin. However, determined to carry on and in a bid to strengthen the line up, the aforementioned Martensson and guitarist Magnus Henriksson have recruited a new rhythm section in Magnus Ulfstedt (drums), and Fredrik Folkare (bass). Still no permanent keyboard player at the moment, although the keyboards on sophomore release 'Second To None' have been left in the more than capable hands of Mats Olausson (Malmsteen, etc.)

Aside from putting together a new line up, Martensson and Henriksson seem to have spent the last three years in sharpening their songwriting skills, as on first listen, 'Second To None' is actually quite distinct sound wise from its predecessor. The hooks are still there, as are the underlying AOR sensibilities, but the brash guitars and bright melodies now seem to have absorbed some of the pop/rock influences bands like Marvellous 3, Mars Electric, and 40Ft Ringo, have brought to the market in the last few years. If you can imagine a Talisman without JSS but with Tommy Denander at the helm instead, throw in a few sweetly seductive Harem Scarem and Diving For Pearls references, and then cold filter the whole lot through a gauze of bright, modern pop/rock, you'll be sailing pretty close to the kind of sound Eclipse have tried to achieve here.

Opener 'Always Standing' has a heavy, funk driven vibe with some at times quite dry sounding riffs, it's harmony laden chorus rising majestically from the affray – nice sprawling guitar solo in the middle too. 'All I Do' which follows has more of Thunder lilt to it (or maybe Bowes And Morley would be more appropriate), but again the chorus is different, this one a kind of Harem Scarem/

Diving For Pearls hybrid. Next up it's title track 'Second To None', a song with more of a traditional Scandie AOR vibe which reminded me of both Return and Stage Dolls.

Moving forward then, there's the punchy urgency of 'Streets Of Gold' (3 Doors Down with a glossy hard rock sheen), the slow burning 'I'll Ask For You', the eclectic, off kilter rhythms of 'Nothing Between Us' (great chorus once again), the atmospheric 'Light Of Day', and closing acoustic lament 'Better World', all very different from one another, yet all slotting together perfectly to give you a clear view of the whole picture.

It did take a few spins before the songs really began to sink home, but I get the impression that's probably the kind of effect Eclipse were looking for with 'Second To None'. A bold and brave mood by a band seemingly not afraid to take a risk or two ... pity more band's don't follow their lead.

8/10 **Dave Cockett**



EVIL MASQUERADE
Welcome To The Show
Frontiers FR CD 186
Avalon Marquee MICP-10426

Any album which kicks off with a rousing, metalized version of Wagner's immortal 'Ride Of The Valkyries' has to be worth an hour of anyone's time, and so it proves with 'Welcome To The Show', the debut offering from new Swedish/Danish partnership Evil Masquerade. Yet another notable collaboration project, Evil Masquerade is essentially the vision of former Zool/Moahni Moahna guitarist Henrik Flyman. Reputedly conceived in a series of recurring nightmares, everything finally manifested itself one late

night in a smoky Copenhagen club when Flyman met up with former Royal Hunt vocalist Henrik Brockmann.

Makes for an interesting, if not a little far fetched, story I'm sure you'll agree, but regardless of its origins, Evil Masquerade promises to be one of the most talked about alliances this year. Featuring guest keyboard contributions from Mats Olausson (Malmsteen, etc.), Richard Andersson (Majestic), and Andre Andersen (Royal Hunt), and mixed by Cornerstone's very own Steen Mogensen, debut album 'Welcome To The Show' is an awe-inspiring collage of shimmering guitars, spiralling keyboards and neo-classically inspired themes. Pulling together some of the best elements of bands like Royal Hunt, Symphony X, Malmsteen and Rainbow, its bombastically overblown brand of symphonic metal is packed with melodramatic imagery and contrasting emotions.

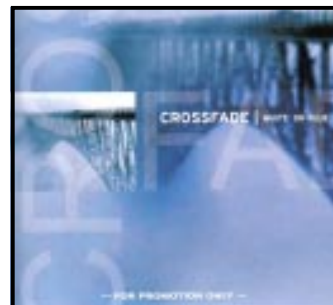
Heavy and relentless, dynamic and sweeping, its arresting guitar flurries and aching good melodies make 'Welcome To The Show' one of the best releases of it's type since Richard Andersson's Space Odyssey album 'Embrace The Galaxy'. Just why it's taken Flyman so long to emerge as a guitar talent of this magnitude is anyone's guess, but on the strength of his display here, the whole neo-classical metal scene is gonna have to reassess it's opinion of him. Part Malmsteen, part Johnny Ohlin (Nation, Dionysus), Flyman leads from the front with a breathtaking display of bombastic riffs and searing solo's.

As the aforementioned 'Ride Of The Valkyries/Grand Opening' reaches it's explosive climax, Evil Masquerade launch full tilt into the equally dynamic title track 'Welcome To The Show' – dramatic and atmospheric, this is sizzling, symphonic power metal at its awe-inspiring best! Changing up a gear the band the head straight for the jugular with the symphonic overdrive of 'The Wind Will Rise' – Flyman riffs with the force of a demon, and just check out the brilliant guitar/keyboard duel with

Richard Andersson mid song. 'Oh Harlequin' by comparison is a mere gentle cantor, it's more measured dose of bombast relying on the hauntingly melodic Arabian thread which runs throughout to make its point.

But that's only the beginning, and having grabbed your attention with such a remarkable opening salvo, Evil Masquerade have absolutely no intention of letting go until you've sold you're very soul to the devil. There's the careering 'Surprises In The Dark' for starters, all marauding and malevolent, it weaves half or dozen or more well known classical motifs into a scorching slab of riff driven angst. 'But You Were Smiling ...' has a precision engineered, almost militaristic beat, the epic 'Lucy The Evil' has probably the biggest hook on the entire album, and the slow burning 'Deliver Us' builds from humble beginnings to a gritty, thunderous climax.

Neo-classical, symphonic metal has had a rougher ride than most over the past decade or so, but if it can still turn out gems like 'Welcome To The Show', it's a long way from the dead duck most would have you believe. Brilliant!
 9.5/10 **Dave Cockett**



CROSSFADE
White On Blue
MTM Music 0681-96

It's taken a while to build up a head of steam, but it finally seems like melodic hard rock (as opposed to metal) and AOR seems to be undergoing something of a long overdue rebirth at the moment. A flurry of high profile activity of late has led to a plethora of flagship releases from the likes of Pride Of Lions, Seventh Key, and the wonderful Shadowman, and these

are ably supported by equally impressive efforts from lesser known acts such as Deacon Street Project, Coastline, and Faithfull. All in all a very satisfying six months for your average wimpwire devotee, and if 'White On Blue', the debut album from Swedish project Crossfade is anything to go by, that looks set to continue unabated.

Considered to be something of a supergroup project, Crossfade is made up of some of the most respected session players that Scandinavia has to offer, players like drummer Per Lindvall who has stints with stellar names such as Abba and A-Ha on his resume. Granted, they might not all come from the traditional hard rock background, but to survive at that kind of level for any length of time, believe me these guys could pick up and play just about anything with anybody. One name that will need no introduction however is that of vocalist Goran Edman (Yngwie Malmsteen, Kharma, Glory, etc.), a world renowned vocalist in his field, and arguably the most sought after talent in Scandinavia right now

Operating in slick, silky smooth AOR/Westcoast territory with just the right tinge of funk and soul, Crossfade have crafted a wonderfully seductive album filled with gently swaying rhythms and subtle moods. Never brash or abrasive, the calming, generally uplifting melodies on 'White On Blue' offer the perfect antidote to the stresses of the average working day. So, just kick off your shoes, dim the lights, and sit back with a nicely chilled Chardonnay as the therapeutic vibes soothingly massage away your troubles – and that from a confirmed metal head! (Either I'm going soft in my old age, or Crossfade have actually come up with something rather special.)

A quirky, almost tribal beat launches the album in a rather puzzling manner, but it's not long before the meandering epic 'The Day The Music Died' breezes in on the back of a softly seductive riff – think Toto meets Hughes/Thrall with an absolute peach of a

chorus. 'Did You Really?' which follows has more of an early hours vibe to it, a strong hint of jazz and blues woven into it's slick, silky smooth fabric – again, another great chorus which to avoid the risk of sounding repetitive later on, is something you could quite easily level at any one of these ten tracks.

Moving forwards, the hypnotic rhythms which launch 'Vanity Fair' do have echoes of the aforementioned 'The Day The Music Died', but overall this track reminds me more of the kind of sound Street Talk were aiming at with 'Ye Gods And Little Fishes'. Then there's the bittersweet emotion of 'A Deeper Shade Of Love' which heads into Richard Marx/Michael Bolton territory, or the sultry 'Thorns Of Life' with it's shimmering crescendo, driven chorus (great harmonies), and finally there's the swaggering 'You' (Preview, or maybe Red Dawn lite), it's pomp tinged strains closing the album on a real emotional high.

Factor in some exquisite musicianship (what else), and a rich, full bodied production, and all in all you have one of the best albums of it's type you're likely to hear all year. If you're a fan of bands like Toto, King Of Hearts, or Street Talk in their more reflective moments, this is a real must.

8.5/10 Dave Cockett



WICKED SENSATION
Exceptional
MTM Music 0681-98

A twin guitar sextet specialising in a more traditional kind of 80's hard rock, German band Wicked Sensation burst on the scene a little over twelve months ago with

their exuberant debut '**Reflected**'. Cast firmly in multi-platinum selling Whitesnake mode (even down to the John Sykes styled guitar attack), it's youthful exuberance and catchy melodies won the band plenty of praise, and a prestigious European tour with UK veterans Dare soon followed. All in all it was the kind of dream start that most bands would quietly sell their grannies for, so it came as quite a shock when it was announced that vocalist Robert Soeterboek had quit for pastures new.

Still, you can't keep a good band down for too long, and determined to get back in the saddle as soon as was humanly possible, the remaining five members set about the task of searching out a replacement for Soeterboek. Enter former Victory vocalist Fernando Garcia (last seen fronting the Michael Voss produced Biss if memory serves me correctly) - a bit of a strange choice perhaps given his pedigree is decidedly more metal edged, but an intriguing prospect nonetheless. And with barely a pause to draw breath, the newly revamped line up quickly settled down in the studio to lay down the basic tracks for sophomore album '**Exceptional**'.

Once again employing the kind of bouncy, late 80's flavoured brand of hard rock which served them so well last time out, Wicked Sensation have excelled themselves once more, this latest release proving to be every bit as good as it's predecessor. This time around they've dampened down some of the more obvious Whitesnake references, which I guess is hardly surprising given Garcia's vocal range, although the Michael Klein/Sang Vong twin guitar axis still has John Sykes written all over it in indelible ink!

Last time out Wicked Sensation employed the talents of influential producer Dennis Ward (Pink Cream 69) to bolster their already impressive attack, and satisfied with the polished edge he gave their sound, they decided it would make sense for him to be at the controls once more. As a departure this time around

however, they also enlisted the services of Helloween's Andi Deris to help out with some of the arrangements, and it's his experience which has probably given '**Exceptional**' that more grown up kind of feeling.

Basically, what you get for your dosh is twelve assorted, smouldering hard rock songs, covering everything from stadium anthems to emotive power ballads. Having listened to '**Exceptional**' at least half a dozen or so times before I sat down to pen this review, I can indeed attest that there are no real stand out cuts on offer, as everything here is of a remarkably high, almost uniform calibre. Having said that however, individual tastes are as like as not to draw certain people towards certain songs, my own personal favourites including the pulsating 'Shining Light', and the powerful, 'Kasmir' flavoured 'The One You Love Ain't Me'.

A job well done guys – here's to album number three!

8/10 Dave Cockett



NOCTURNAL RITES
New World Messiah
Century Media 77532-2

Proof positive (if it were needed) that dogged determination and absolute self belief can really reap dividends in the long term. A symphonic/neo-classical power metal band from Sweden, Nocturnal Rites have been kicking around for over a decade now. Weathering the storm of the barren mid 90's, recent years have seen their fortunes start to rise, solid support tours with the likes of Saxon and HammerFall (not too mention a number of high profile festival appearances), pushing

their cause yet further. I first chanced upon the band (somewhat reluctantly I'll readily admit) about five years or so ago when their second album '**Tales Of Mystery And Imagination**' landed on my desk for review (cheers Matt!).

Now, I've never been much of a fan of any kind of black/death/extreme metal of any description, and when I first clocked the name Nocturnal Rites, my initial reaction was that they must be some sort of shadowy, occult obsessed bunch of loonies. As you can imagine then, it was with some trepidation that I finally plucked up the courage to slip the damn CD into the ol' death deck, but when I did, what met my ears was a bit of a revelation. A smouldering mixture of HammerFall and Malmsteen brimming over with strong melodies, Nocturnal Rites really did fire the imagination. And less than twelve months later they went one better, '**The Sacred Talisman**' perfecting the mix, it's exquisitely sculpted songs finally nailing that Nocturnal Rites sound.

Since then the band have released two further albums – '**Afterlife**' in 2000, and '**Shadowland**' a couple of years later – and whilst both have had their moments, neither has had the consistency or longevity of '**The Sacred Talisman**'. However, with the release of '**New World Messiah**', Nocturnal Rites have taken another bold step forward, recapturing the essence of what made '**The Sacred Talisman**' so compelling, and distilling it into something even more impressive. The pulsating riffs and heady atmospherics which have always defined their work are still to be found in abundance, but these are now anchored to some of the strongest, most memorable melodies the band have constructed in years!

Nowhere is this more readily apparent than in the monumental 'Egyptica', a breathtaking, relentless epic who's haunting, eastern tinged refrains offer the most memorable slice of neo-classical melodrama the world has seen since Stratovarius released the mighty '**Babylon**' back in the mid 90's! Everything that Nocturnal

Rites have been working towards is defined in that one song, a once in a lifetime slice of perfection that less than one percent of bands every truly achieve.

That's not to say that the rest of the tracks on **'New World Messiah'** pale by comparison, far from it. Title track and opener **'New World Messiah'** is a bombastic, kerosene fuelled monster filled with complex twists and turns and a harmony laden chorus which reminded me at time of Leatherwolf at their best. **'Against The World'** slows the pace right down, smouldering riffs, soaring vocals and theatrical atmospherics all combining beautifully. Elsewhere there's the careering **'Avalon'** (yet another great chorus), the precision engineered **'Awakening'**, the eloquent reflections of **'The Flame Will Never Die'**, the clarion call **'One Nation'**, and the soaring **'Nightmare'** – all breathtakingly intense, yet compulsively addictive.

Killer songs and a killer production, Nocturnal Rites have risen to the challenge admirably, laying down the gauntlet to all comers with the simple message **'Follow that!'**. A real brooding firecracker dripping with class and emotion – brilliant!

9.5/10 **Dave Cockett**

REISSUES ROUNDUP

By Brian McGowan

Barren Cross x 3

(Rykodisc)

Renegade

(Renegade Productions)

Rick Derringer x 2

(BGO Records)

Takara

(Lion Music)

High Tension

(TOPX)

Backed by CCM giants John and Dino Elefante, white metal band Barren Cross were CCM's answer to WASP and Alice Cooper. Rykodisc have now reissued two of the band's studio albums - **'Atomic Arena'** (1987) and **'State Of**

Control' (1989) - plus their 1990 live album **'Hotter Than Hell Live'**.

Not having listened to these albums for many years I was surprised that they still pack such a visceral punch. You could make an argument that Mike Lee's guttural, Goth like vocals and the band's grinding riffs are a typical model for contemporary death metal. Given that you couldn't see the band's sleeves for their beliefs, there's more than a little irony there.

Both studio albums successfully mix melody and metal, though anyone expecting the soaring hard rock choruses you associate with the Elefante Brothers and their other protégés like The Brave and Halo may well be disappointed.

It may only be half an hour long, but listening to **'Back From The Dead'**, a collection of eighties' backtracks from Canadian band Renegade, was like finding a grain of gold in a pocketful of sand.

Keyboard player/producer/songwriter Jim Buckshon delivered a big AOR (with delicate touches of eighties' pop) sound on a small budget that still stands up today. There's skill and subtlety to the John Farnham like **'Best of Me'**, a spare, streamlined energy to **'Big City Nights'**, and best of all, the huge, stadium sound of **'Don't Be Afraid Of The Dark'** is as good as anything off Strangeways' second or third albums.

In fairness, it wasn't all the work of Buckshon. The band's outstanding potential clearly got them noticed as the **'Big City Nights'** track was produced by Mike Fraser at the Little Mountain studio in Vancouver. However, why only one and why it didn't lead further is a mystery. (The CD can be purchased from www.renegadesounds.com).

In 1976, at the height of disco and the onset of punk, being a rock recording was a pretty lonely experience. You certainly wouldn't find yourself in the company of chart albums. So it was with Rick Derringer's first real solo release.

'Derringer' was a pretty damn good rock album which went nowhere. Four songs written with Brill Building legend, Cynthia Weil, who'd written hits with Barry Mann for Elvis, The Drifters and Gene Pitney, plus one written in collaboration with John (Lone Star) Sloman guaranteed the quality of the music. Vinnie Appice and Kenny Aronson guaranteed the quality of the musicianship. It added up to rare treat, which just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Equally out of place and time was Derringer's 1977 album **'Sweet Evil'**. This was even more of a pity, as Jack Douglas was brought in to produce, and he fairly beefed up the band sound. British label BGO has just re-released both albums, giving them a deserved second chance to grab our attention and admiration.

Takara released four albums before finally folding, and they form a fine legacy. Strangely, given that Jef Scott Soto was never actually a full member of the band, it is Takara that we generally associate with his name. Lion Music have just released **'Best 93-98'**, an 18 track testament to the band's uncomplicated but finely crafted melodic rock.

Retrospectives generally prompt re-appraisal, but it must be said if Takara's albums never truly scaled the heights of greatness – often due to Soto's hackneyed lyrical style –

they at least coupled many of Neal Grusky's cracking tunes and vertiginous hooks to powerful and passionate performances. Blazing openers **'Spotlight'** and **'Two Hearts Together'** probably best represent the band's style, but the harmonic drive and clean production lines of **'Your Song'** and **'December'** from the second album saw the band at the top of their game. Newcomers to Takara should start here.

German band High Tension folded in 1992 after releasing four albums through the eighties into the nineties. Tours with Nazareth, Girlschool and Victory enhanced their reputation as a hot live act, but did little to raise their profile. The much hoped for breakthrough stubbornly failed to materialise.

Now reformed, **'High Tension Best Of'** is designed to attract rock media attention prior to the release of new material later this year. Vocalist Armin Weissnar's heavily accented vocals are an immediate obstacle, but the band's generic US influenced European rock, by definition, has little to distinguish it from hundreds of band ploughing the same furrow at the time. Only the Biloxi/ Jaded Heart flavoured arena rock of **'Dance The Night'** and **'When Heaven Comes Down'** from the last album, if you can get past the clunky lyrics, shows any kind of promise for their imminent "comeback" release.

More reissues next month.

Hard RoxX are:

- Dave Cockett.....Reviews
- John Hegarty.....Reviews
- Alan Holloway.....Reviews
- Matthew Honey.....Editor & Distributor
- Brian McGowan.....Reviews

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