

"Now Hear This"

OLIVE

Trickle

July 8, 2000

(Maverick Recording Co.)

Olive owes a huge debt to the space-rock and electronic music of the 1970s and 1980s. Like the trippy band Portishead, the English duo specializes in sweeping, elegant, swirling, minor-key electronic ballads. Singer Ruth-Ann (no last-names, please) has the kind of laconic, smooth voice that lends itself to moody atmospherics, while instrument master Tim Kellest, formerly of Simply Red, has a deep understanding of the history and customs of the genre, from Kraftwerk to Art of Noise to the latest rave-scene grooves.

The songs are a bit drippy — the lyrics tend to sound like the earnest journal entries of a lovelorn middle-aged therapy patient. But the songs are so absorbing and atmospheric that listeners can easily let the psychobabble wash past them.

The band pays explicit homage to its musical ancestors by covering 10cc's trippy classic "I'm Not in Love." But in a topsy-turvy move that would no doubt please the jokey 10cc, Olive gives the song the full Donna Summer treatment and turns it into a rave-ready dance number instead of the fountainhead of baroque electronica. — Sean Scully

JERRY McCAIN

This Stuff Just Kills Me

(Jericho Records)

Really good down-and-dirty blues is about five basic things — sex, love, sex, loss and sex. Not necessarily in that order.

Mr. McCain is a terrific down-and-dirty bluesman. The 69-year-old from Gadsden, Ala., is a randy grandfather who is just flat out fun to hear. His songs make you feel as though you're sitting in a whiskey-soaked dive somewhere on a sweltering Southern night as his harmonica cries and his guitarist cranks out fantastic 12-bar blues.

His songs are simple and untutored. The best are his racy anthems, such as "Viagra Man," proclaiming his mastery of the art of love despite his advancing age.

A few are a bit more hokey, with Mr. McCain dispensing grandfatherly advice against the evils of drugs, jealousy and violence. These lyrics are sometimes kind of silly — "Drug abuse is bad" is about as sophisticated as it gets — but even the preachy clinkers are too much fun to hold against him.

When he gets on his favorite topic — sweet lovin' — there are very few alive today who can out-blues this master of the art. — S.S.

THE FIGGS

For EP Fans Only

(Hearbox)

The Figgs are just plain fun to listen to. They are nothing revolutionary — plenty of bands, from the Kinks to the Foo Fighters have drawn from the same well — but they play straight-ahead bar-band music as well as anyone out there.

This time, the New York trio spits out a short collection — just seven songs, thus the title — of funny, hip, little songs sung to the traditional college band guitar and Ringo Starr-style drum bashing.

A good listen, if nothing else.

They are not, of course, the most original sound around, but the Figgs do get points for their song titles. "Excuse the Lame Excuse" and "I Thought I Drank the Drink but the Drink Drank Me" are the best. — S.S.