

NOW HEAR THIS

A weekly trip through the new-release aisle of your local music store

SHAMBHU AND THE PUNYA CREW

Do Things Right
(Balaragh Records)

Shambhu and the Punya Crew, a local quintet, plays competent, inoffensive, jazz-inflected pop that never lives up to the promise glimmering tantalizingly around the edges.

The band manages some solid instrumental work on the album "Do Things Right." Bassist Ronnie Kidd creates an intriguing effect by using his instrument almost like a lead guitar.

Shambhu — a German-born, D.C.-bred world traveler — plays guitar straight out of Brian Eno's better sonic experiments from the 1970s.

But all together, the package is less than the sum of its parts.

The main problem lies in the incredibly trite songs — "Can't go wrong if we do things right/Can't take long if we do things right" is only one of the better lyrical samples.

The musicians also seem to be so fixated on being polished and refined that they forget at times to be interesting. Most pieces come off as throwaway light jazz, best played in an office somewhere during work hours.

The best track? "S.P.F.T.A. Chant," a 40-second Indian prayer Shambhu appears to have picked up in his various travels.

— Sean Scully

NERF HERDER

How to Meet Girls
(Honest Don's)

Quick quiz: Does the world need more hip, ironic musical pranksters spouting Gen-X pop culture references to a bouncy beat?

If you said "yes," you richly deserve a copy of Nerf Herder's second full-length album. In fact, you deserve several copies. The more you take, the less the rest of us will have to hear the sounds of dead horses being flogged.

This brand of music, known by some as "Nerdcare," was done better more than a decade ago, when the Dead Milkmen recorded the classic "Punk Rock Girl."

Nerf Herder's songs are meant to be amusing in their crude snarkiness. Instead, they are simply crude. The song "Courtney" hits the album's low point by inviting singer Courtney Love to commit certain sex acts.

It's clear the band was trying to be funny when it wrote the song "Lamer Than Lame." Who could have predicted band members had written such a fitting epitaph for their own careers. — S.S.

TODD SNIDER

Happy to Be Here
(Oh Boy Records)

Todd Snider is the John Prine of his generation, so it's entirely fitting that he bag his longtime label, MCA, and join Mr. Prine's own Oh Boy Records for his latest album.

Mr. Snider has that rare gift of mocking the world without being snarky or ironic. His gently biting observations and slowly ambling songs are as refreshing and amusing as Mr. Prine was in his prime.

Saying which track is best proves to be impossible — they start good and get better. A few stand out: The title track should be the official theme song of the Clinton era, while "Keep off the Grass" could be the best commencement address never delivered.

Mr. Snider's 1994 debut, "Songs for the Daily Planet" got good critical marks but was largely ignored by the public. MCA never seemed able to broaden his base. If there's any justice in the music world, Oh Boy Records will prove to be a better home and get Mr. Snider the audience he so richly deserves. — S.S.

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