

SPIN CHECK



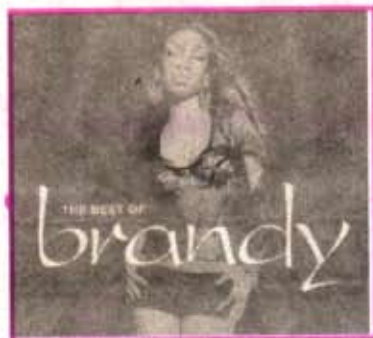
Leela James
A Change Is Gonna Come
 Warner Brother Records

With a few strums of the guitar, a purring growl and the mention of legends past circa Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight, Tina Turner and Chaka Khan, Leela James introduces herself to the masses on the album's first track, aptly titled "Music," like a breath of fresh air. Named after Sam Cooke's 1964 hit, *A Change Is Gonna Come* is a nostalgic, gritty, soul-driven record that is infused with funk, and sexual innuendoes, courtesy of a line from *Soulfood* which asks the listener to "sip [Leela] up like lemonade from a mason jar." In a bluesy vibrato and an alto tone, Leela uses her raw pipes to exude the heart-break, misery and despair that succumbs those in love. Unlike many of the pop starlets of the present, none of the vocals are forced or notes held in *American Idol* fashion to exude emotions that don't exist. Hip-hop influenced tracks like "Ghetto" and a masterful remake of the 1996 No Doubt hit, "Don't Speak," display Leela's talent for versatility, while remaining strikingly full of intrigue. In the album's silky title track, Leela breathes new life into the poetic lyrics; "I was born by the river in a little tent and Lord, just like the river I've been running ever since," illustrating that what was once old is easily new again.



Vivian Green
Vivian
 Columbia

Falling in love is a wonderful experience, falling out of love, however, is new material and cause for a sophomore album release. On her debut, *A Love Story*, Vivian Green delved into the complexities of a break-up and she goes back to familiar territory on her second release, *Vivian*. With tracks like "Mad," "Selfish," "Frustrated," and "Gotta Go Gotta Leave (Tired)," *Vivian* plays like the diary of a mad black woman who is ready for a new love but still dependent on the old one. With all 12 songs written, sung and co-produced by Green, Vivian is a definite labor of love. Lyrically, her candor is amazing as Green talks about everything from losing her virginity to losing her mind. Vocally, her blockbuster notes float clear and crisp amidst a complex contemporary sound complete with piano keys that drop like tears from a woman with a wounded heart.



Brandy
The Best of Brandy
 Atlantic

Whenever an artist comes out with a "greatest hits," or in this case, "a best of" album, I always wonder if it was necessary to take that walk down memory lane. In many cases, the walk is rather short a la Britney Spears who released her greatest hits album only six years after she released her debut album. In other cases the release is irrelevant, meaning we forget about the artist and don't need to be reminded they ever existed in the first place by way of an album that serves only to rehash the past. In some ways, this describes the plight of Brandy. Not only does *The Best of Brandy* only mark her 5th release, but it also comes just nine months after her fourth album, *Afrosisic*, which experienced lackluster sales to say the least. Still, Brandy's decade career is one worth looking back upon. The album includes 16 top 20 Pop and R&B singles including a remix of "I Wanna Be Down," featuring Queen Latifah, YoYo and MC Lyte. Duets rule on the compilation. Brandy teams up with Wanya from Boyz II Men ("Brokenhearted"), Monica ("The Boy is Mine"), Mase ("Top of the World"), Kanye West ("Talk About Our Love") and of course, her brother Ray J on the Phil Collins classic, "Another Day in Paradise." Even now, if you ask me, the best of Brandy can be found on her album entitled *Never Say Never* released back in 1998, but this "best of" is a solid runner-up.





Zion-I
True & Livin'
 Live Up Records

Hip-hop heads rejoice! Zion-I has always been a respected Bay Area group amongst underground hip-hop fans. They have a great live show and MC Zion is quite the intelligent and talented lyricist. However, though

"[Zion-I's] sound has been streamlined - featuring soulful and jazzy samples fused with gritty, bass-kickin' beats."

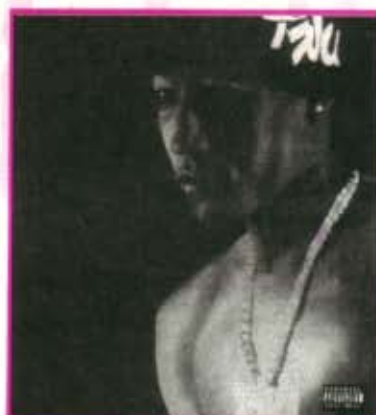
their fan base might disagree, the group's knack for genre-bending and their overall trip-hop sound was usually a put-off for hip-hop heads who just wanted to hear tight verses over some equally tight beats. This time around, they've nailed it. While there is a sprinkling of their more trip-hop styled tracks,

Amp Live's sound has been streamlined - featuring soulful and jazzy samples fused with gritty, bass-kickin' beats. Coupled with all-star cameos from Talib Kweli, Aesop Rock, Del Tha Funkee Homosapien and Blackalicious' Gift of Gab and you've got yourself a hip-hop album to rock all summer long.



Z-Trip
Shifting Gears
 Hollywood Records

Long love the old school! Z-Trip showcases both his skills as a respected and critically-adored DJ and his love for hip-hop/DJ roots on this excellent 15 track collection of jams that sound as if they could've been pulled straight out of the '80s. Though the beats and DJ turntable work definitely has a fresh old school aesthetic, the lyricists Trip got onboard keep things based in the 21st century. Soup of the Jurassic 5 starts things up on "Listen to the DJ," Lyrics Born lives up to his name once again on "The Get Down" and the likes of freestyle master Supernatural, Murs, Aceyalone and the legendary Chuck D all show up in support of Z-Trip. As Murs points out on "Breakfast Club," this is hip-hop and (in this case) shouldn't be taken seriously. If you can't have fun with it, you probably shouldn't be listening.



C-Murder
The Truest \$#!@ I Ever Said
 Koch Records

We know that we rag on the New No Limit without any sort of mercy. We know that even though there's probably plenty of ya'll out there who've

"...it's not all that horrible, especially considering that it was recorded behind bars on a tape recorder."

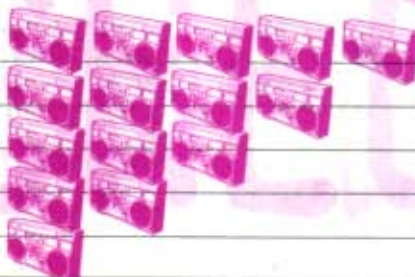
been No Limit cadets ever since Master P's first "opus," we still bash Percy and his crew every last chance we get. For this, we reluctantly apologize... to the fans. We'll try to make amends by saying that C-Murder's new album isn't all that horrible, especially considering that it was recorded behind bars

on a tape recorder. Percy's younger brother still maintains his unique flow (which made him a standout performer on No Limit) and raps about his hard times, even getting "deep" on a few verses. Is he *really* innocent? Well, according to his music, he's one violent dude, so let's just say the verdict is still out on that one...



Ratings:

- Cop Immediately** (5 Stereos)
- Sub-Woofer Worthy** (4 Stereos)
- Solid Effort** (3 Stereos)
- Play With Caution** (2 Stereos)
- Permanently Mute** (1 Stereo)



SPIN CHECK



Bobby Valentino
Disturbing Tha Peace Presents: Bobby Valentino
 DTPRecords

Let's get the negative points of this album out of the way first. *Disturbing Tha Peace Presents...* is not going to win any points for originality. There's really nothing on this entire album that'll make you do a double take the way a group like OutKast can make you do. However, with that said, Bobby Valentino isn't trying to break new ground; he's just trying to make some smooth, soulful and romantic music. Is he a success? Definitely. Being fortunate enough to hook up with Ludacris' label is probably one of the best things that could've happened to Bobby. His voice sounds great over the album's tight production, which never disappoints and never falls into either "boring R&B" or "just another hip-hop inspired R&B" categories. The always entertaining Ludacris does drop a verse on "Give Me a Chance," but overall this is solid, soulful music, the way R&B should be.



Purple City
Road To The Riches: The Best of the Purple City Mixtapes
 Babygrande Records

This has got to stop already. We get it. Purple is your favorite color. It's not necessarily gang-related, but you can't get enough of Barney the Dinosaur's pigment. This isn't an album full of new material, just a "best of" consisting of tracks from their *mostly* independently-slung mixtapes. Locally, these guys are popular, but out of the twenty-one tracks/100+ minutes featured here (five tracks are *really* lame skits), a listener would be hard-pressed to really pick out a handful of hot singles. While the production isn't terrible, it does border lazy and lyrically, these guys are spittin' that same ol' pop-friendly street nonsense. There's a reason that Cam'ron has actually won mainstream appeal, whereas his Purple City comrades haven't. Maybe it's time for them to hang up their mics and get a new job... as Grimace impersonators.



Med
Push Comes To Shove
 Stones Throw Records

Underground hip-hop heads have been waiting to hear what Medaphore has to offer since his verses with the likes of the Lootpack and Madvillian. Well, no need to fear - Med's first full-length outing is full of hard-hitting bangers that'll sound hot no matter if you're the typical Stones Throw backpacker or someone who'd rather just blast this joint from the back of your Escalade. *Push Comes To Shove* is full of sharp production, which is no surprise considering the line-up. Madlib, Jay Dee, Oh No and even Just Blaze all chime in with their production expertise. On the lyrical front, Med definitely holds his own and is never really over shadowed the album's exceptional production. Though this cat hails from the West Coast, this album sounds like a strictly East Coast affair, right down to a cameo featuring the Bronx's own Diamond D on "Pressure." When push comes to shove, Med proves that he has the chops to push back.

"When push comes to shove, Med proves that he has the chops to push back."

