

SOUND PATROL René Spencer Saller

## Weird sisters

Are Bianca and Sierra Casady the geniuses that their admirers (John Darnielle, David Byrne,



**CocoRosie**  
*The Adventures of Ghosthorse and Stillborn*  
(Touch and Go)

countless bloggers) say they are, or are they simply the newest naked emperors to hypnotize the hipster elite? Artless prodigies or practiced flimflammers? Idiots savants or plain old idiots? These questions are not rhetorical. I honestly can't decide whether the sisters

Casady, known collectively as CocoRosie, have pulled off the great indie-rock swindle or they're the kind of *artistes-with-an-e* whom everyone pretends to love until, decades later, everyone actually does.

Whatever the case, the Casadys have no real reason to clear up the confusion. Nothing fascinates the chattering classes like a couple of androgynous expats who may or may not know how to play their instruments. With their painted-on mustaches and *faux-naïf* hugger-mugger, their lo-fi bricolage and highbrow juxtapositions, they vacillate between being intensely annoying and perversely appealing. They enthuse about fairies and dress up as Native Americans. They shuttle between homes in Brooklyn and Paris, between studios in Iceland and the south of

France. One of them, Sierra, is a classically trained opera singer; the other, Bianca, sounds like the hip-hop-infatuated offspring of a badly constipated Björk and a libidinous Shirley Temple. Their music is a technoprimitive grab-bag of rudimentary beats, a few synth or piano chords, lots of literal bells and whistles, and weird loops (including, but not limited to, a whinnying pony, a coin spinning on a countertop, and a creaking door). Hip-hop, of course, is rife with freaky samples, but the difference between, say, Timbaland and CocoRosie is that the former uses such effects as a condiment and the latter turns them into a meal.

Unfortunately, what was a novelty three years ago may be hardening into kitsch. *The Adventures of Ghosthorse and Stillborn*, the duo's third album, is negligibly more polished than previous efforts, its production values a bit less rinky-dink, its instrumentation somewhat more refined. But the cutesy quotient, alas, is still in overdrive. Underneath all the psychosexual posturing, the surface grime, and the requisite infusions of irony (let's hope it's irony, anyway), *Ghosthorse* is the sonic equivalent of a warehouse full of Precious Moments figurines. There's a fine line between childlike and childish, but who besides a total perv wants to see a couple of grown women toeing it? (Confidential to Bianca: You're 25 years old now, and the little-deaf-girl singsong shtick is getting icky.)

To paraphrase the nursery-school rhyme,

when CocoRosie is good, it's very good, but when it's bad, it's horrid. The opening track, the hideously titled "Rainbowarriors," comes off like something a teenage pagan might intone over a vegan potluck: "We gathered in a circle, stood round the rainbow fire/Burning embers, hearts united, we remember mystical beauty." The cringes continue apace with the infantile reggae jam "Japan," which features Bianca's regrettable attempt to imitate Jamaican patois, a seriously stupid rape analogy, and what are surely the all-time suckiest rhymes about Iraq (concluding with the howler "peanut-butter jelly and other snacks"). Yet "Japan" also contains a ridiculously lovely operatic interlude from Sierra, which almost, but not quite, atones for the aforementioned crimes. "Houses," on the other hand, a denuded piano-blues-cum-Impressionist art song, is nothing short of mesmerizing; when Sierra's startling mezzo-soprano takes over and the piano darkens and swells, damned if CocoRosie doesn't pull off a passable Fauré. *Ghosthorse* goes back and forth like that, the ridiculous ramming into the sublime, for 40 frustrating minutes. Almost perfectly pitched between awful and awesome, the CD has a binary energy that saves it from mediocrity but can't quite propel it into excellence. ■

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## Melancholy man

Starbucks references have become an indie cliché, a form of slackerist shorthand whereby



**Paul McCartney**  
*Memory Almost Full*  
(Hear Music)

privileged whites rag on the economic class that spawned them. To invoke the Starbucks brand in a record review is to dismiss the music under consideration as yuppie pabulum: It goes down easily enough, but therein lies the problem. Starbucks music isn't exactly syn-

onymous with the soft-rock swill that pulses through waiting rooms and elevators, and it's this very indeterminacy, what Freud called "the narcissism of minor differences," that troubles the insecure hipster. In other words, the irony clause permits — nay, encourages — a fondness for Neil Diamond; far more problematic is a fondness for Feist, who, despite her cred-boosting affiliations with Peaches and Broken Social Scene, just might wind up on your mom's iPod next week.

That Paul McCartney is the first artist to release an album on Hear Music, Starbucks' new record label, makes all kinds of sense. Despite his status as the greatest bassist in the history of rock & roll and the songwriting genius responsible for "Eleanor Rigby," "For No One," and "Maybe I'm

Amazed," McCartney is also a favorite target of hipsters (beginning with John Lennon, who once likened him to Engelbert Humperdinck). In all fairness, Sir Paul is eminently mockable. He's sickeningly rich. He wrote "Freedom," one of the most inane and indefensible songs written in the aftermath of 9/11. He married Heather Mills. Whereas Lennon died a martyr, poor Macca must soldier on to collect fresh humiliations. There is something both grotesquely comical and ineffably sad about the slow decline of a cutie-pie (c.f., *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*, Shirley Temple Black). His puppy-dog eyes are growing filmy, his baby-face mug a welter of fissures and pockets. The Cute One turned 65 this week, and time is finally catching up with him.

Some have compared *Memory Almost Full*, McCartney's latest album, to Bob Dylan's *Time Out of Mind*, which is tempting — both are the work of old men confronting their own mortality — but ultimately absurd. Dylan was born old; McCartney seemed to linger for decades in a state of suspended adolescence. Although he was never the lightweight that his detractors have accused him of being, he certainly wrote his share of silly love songs (and at least one silly love song in defense of silly love songs). There was always something maddening about him, a kind of willful, almost Reaganesque imperviousness. Scratch

the surface of that blinding optimism and you'd find sadness, disappointment, maybe even anger, but the surface was so dazzling that few bothered.

With *Memory Almost Full*, you don't have to dig very deep to find the melancholy core. It's still a Paul McCartney album — all primitive rhymes and complex sonorities — but the darkness sluices through even the sunniest songs. Take "Dance Tonight," the CD's opening cut, a rudimentary ditty forged from a thudding kick drum and a zippy mandolin. The lyrics ("Everybody gonna dance tonight/ Everybody gonna feel alright") could have been written by an enterprising first-grader during recess, a what-the-hell effect that's further confirmed by a whistling solo. Before long, though, minor chords sneak over a buzzy bridge, and all those blithe imperatives start sounding kind of desperate, the wishful thinking of a doomed man. "Gratitude," a loosey-goosey gospel testimonial in the vein of "Hey Jude," starts out like just another silly love song, and then all of its sweetness suddenly curdles: "I should stop loving you/ Think what you put me through/ But I don't want to lock my heart away." Being happy isn't such a simple thing, he seems to be saying. *You* try it sometime. ■

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## The feminine mystique

Gretsches and gams, gams and Gretsches. That's the Gore Gore Girls' bag, and if it's



The Gore Gore Girls  
*Get the Gore*  
(Bloodshot)

not yours, well, you can't say you weren't warned. The cover of the Detroit quartet's new CD, *Get the Gore*, says it all: two curvy lower limbs, set off to pornalicious perfection in stiletto do-me boots, and one curvy vintage Gretsch guitar, equipped with a Bigsby

tremolo bar and eagle-embossed pick guard. The iconography isn't subtle, but it's effective. The Gore Gore Girls are, to swipe a term coined by rad-fem blogger Twisty Faster, *empowerful*. They're doing it for themselves in their vinyl microminis. They're beating the boys at their own game while the boys beat, uh, other stuff. It's all depressingly consistent with the new bikini-waxing, cleavage-flaunting, Suicide Girls-sanctioned school of feminism, whose naïve adherents labor under the delusion that they're sex-positive free agents subverting the patriarchy by — and this is the tricky part, the undoing of many a starry-eyed pole dancer — reinscribing its core values. See, all you have to do is invert the paradigm (chicks on top!), and *voilà*: You're

no longer just another slab of helpless meat; you're a fully emancipated hamburger patty, ready to leap onto the grill unassisted. You go, Gore Gore Girls!

Yeah, I know: It's unfair to blame the Gore Gore Girls for failing to dismantle the patriarchy when they just want to have fun, and, given their ravenous appetite for misogyny-marinated retro rawk, a certain amount of cognitive dissonance seems inevitable. The band — which consists of guitarist/singer and principal songwriter Amy Surdu (a.k.a. Amy Gore), lead guitarist Marlene "Hammer" Hammerle, bassist Carol Anne Schumacher (also of the Detroit Cobras), and drummer Nicky Styxx — is named after a movie by grindhouse auteur Herschell Gordon Lewis. One of the songs on the album was co-written by notorious hustler/hack, Runaways Svengali, and alleged woman-hater Kim Fowley. This all jibes nicely with the band's predilection for '60s garage-punk and girl-group tropes; between the raunchy self-assertion of the former and the melodramatic self-immolation of the latter, there's not much room for advanced gender studies.

In light of these philosophical and conceptual shortcomings, all that remains is to judge the Gore Gore Girls on the merits of their music. Extricating the raw product from the hyperstylized package isn't easy — image is a big part of

the Gore Gore Girls' mystique, as it is for many of their peers, not excluding the ones with Y chromosomes. Still, it's fair to ask whether anyone would care about this album if it weren't the handiwork of four hot young women. The answer, it pains me to say, is probably no.

That said, *Get the Gore* isn't an all-out suckfest. The playing, especially Surdu's and Hammerle's dueling guitars, is consistently competent, if rarely compelling. Surdu doesn't have a wide range or infallible pitch, but her gutsy growl gets the job done, most notably on straightforward garage rave-ups "Fox in a Box" and "Don't Cry," when it blossoms into a full-blown bellow. Oddball instrumental flourishes, such as the groovy sitar on the psych-pop obscurity "Where Evil Grows," lend a bit of flair to the standard-issue dirt-rock formula. Peppy handclaps break up the requisite fuzztone sludge; sassy call-and-response backing vocals sweeten the Ellie Greenwich/Jeff Barry/Phil Spector gem "All Grown Up" and Surdu's deeply goofy but undeniably catchy "Sweet Potato." But the sad fact is, every midsize town in America has at least a couple of bands that sound like the Gore Gore Girls. Unfortunately for them, they don't look as good in miniskirts. ■

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