

Human Reaction

Big Ego DL/LP

SLW cc Watt

Purple Plow Pie

Kill Rock Stars DL/LP

Pelicanman

Planet Chernobyl

Org CD/DL/LP

Recent projects involving bassist Mike Watt can appear at odds with the kind of music that sealed his reputation as a hardcore punk figurehead. But what did hardcore mean to a band like Minutemen? As demonstrated by their great American punk rock document *Double Nickels On The Dime*, hardcore was a near to hand DIY folk idiom for a couple of “*fucking corn dogs*” in Hollywood. It’s a storytelling language: personal, political, diaristic and unpretentious. With that in mind, the new output isn’t atypical.

Still, of Watt’s active projects, MSSV (which stands for main steam stop valve) with guitarist Mike Baggetta and drummer Stephen Hodges is the most recognisable as a punk power trio. At least it is on *Human Reaction*’s opening track, the mid-tempo mainline sugar hit “Say What You Gotta Say”. It sets a course for approximately every third or fourth subsequent track. Meanwhile the exploratory, largely instrumental excursions in between err more towards Talk Talk or Slint, while the queasy darkness of “Junk Haiku” calls to mind something like Pere Ubu’s “Sentimental Journey” from *The Modern Dance*.

SLW cc Watt is a duo with Samuel Locke Ward, and their second full-length *Purple Plow Pie* segues from semi-psychedelic lo-fi power pop to strident glam rock with abandon. Watt’s gravelly baritone graces short ponderous monologues between hook-laden, incongruously satirical reflections on post-Capitol riot MAGA horror. “Help Me” – the most Bolan inflected glitter stomp on an album with abundant T Rex inflections – boasts an outrageously catchy refrain, “*Help me/I’m runnin’ with the assholes, I’m runnin’ with the goons/But I have so much more in my heart*”, caricaturing the anguish of the misunderstood nascent fascist.

There is incongruity to *Planet Chernobyl* too – dissonance even, though it’s more formal/thematic than sonic. A libretto in 15 stanzas by poet, publisher and later beatnik Charles Plymell, it’s set to music by Watt and vocalist Petra Haden under the name Pelicanman. Haden’s voice is never less than crystalline, with a jazz-like near-vocalese pirouetting through chamber strings and bluegrass phrasings wholesome enough to be radio stings. The sound is so clean it both jars with and illuminates the fine detail of Plymell’s apocalyptic vision of nuclear disaster and state malfeasance, which is, frankly, wild. It’s the most offroad of these three releases and perhaps the hardest to get one’s head around.

James Gormley

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