

Sound alternatives

By [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [October 31, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Surprise

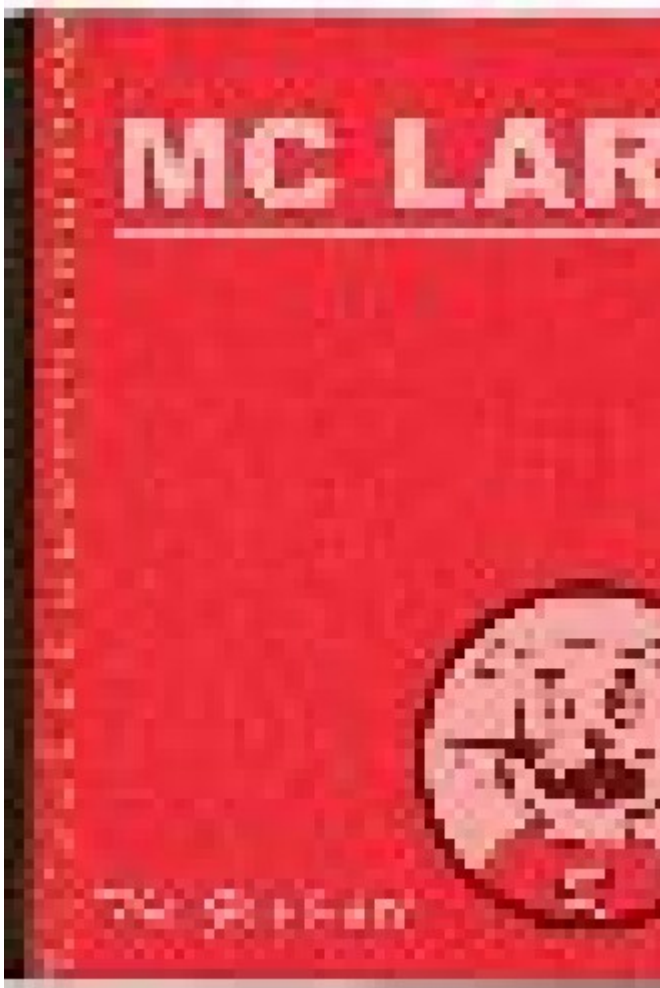
Paul Simon
Warner Bros.



Good Monsters

Jars of Clay

Essential



The Graduate

MC Lars

Horris



Mechanical Sunshine

Jai Agnish
Clerestory AV

Regina Spektor



Begin to Hope

Regina Spektor

Sire



The River in Reverse

Elvis Costello and Allen Toussaint
Verve

Gracing the cover of Paul Simon's album *Surprise* (Warner Brothers) is an image of a wide-eyed infant. It's a fitting one, as this album represents a potent artistic rebirth. Rather than singing silly (if catchy) ditties about 50 ways to leave your lover or about smoking a jay before taking the stage, Simon tackles themes of faith and the quest for meaning with a Jacob's determination. The result shimmers much like the other image on the sleeve: placid water that, judging by the content of this album, runs quite deep.

Simon, who introduced South African rhythm and Afropop textures to the West with *Graceland*, has never shied away from trying new things. He runs the risk of appearing to be in search of musical Viagra—you might think he has been listening

to the youthful postrock of Radiohead, judging by the confluence of electronic blips, guitar slashes and sonic washes that course through this disc. Yet Simon has always been one to advance trends rather than ape them.

Employing superstar producer Brian Eno (U2), Simon wears his age and experience proudly, whether through his frayed voice or his worldly-wise lyrics. He sings in the dreamy funk meditation “Outrageous,” “I’m tired / Nine hundred sit-ups a day / And I’m tired of painting my hair the color of mud.” That same song asks repeatedly, “Who’s gonna love you when your looks are gone?” He sings the response with sublime conviction: “God will / Like he waters the flowers on your window sill.”

Also unforgettable is the scorching indictment “Wartime Prayers,” which takes a swipe at those who would use the pulpit or their faith to foster senseless conflict. (“People hungry for the voice of God hear lunatics and liars.”) The stunning combination of gospel choir, acoustic guitar and electronic muck suggests a worship service staged amidst a napalm strike.

“Once Upon a Time There Was an Ocean” depicts the desperation of the working man in a way that thematically harkens back to “The Boxer” and invokes Genesis: “I want to shake every limb in the garden of Eden, and make every lover the love of my life.” The song ends with an epiphany that could have blossomed from a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem: light spills through a stained-glass window while a choir sings “and all the old hymns and family names came fluttering down as leaves of emotion.”

“Beautiful” is a tender ballad that celebrates the adoption of babies from strife-laden nations, while “Father and Daughter” is a straightforward, earnest anthem of father-daughter love, built on spirals of guitar melody reminiscent of John Lennon’s “Beautiful Boy.” Simon has not gone soft, nor is he phoning it in. This album not only lives up to its title, but suggests that God is the master of the startling, the serendipitous—the source of all that is surprising.

Some other notable CDs:

Jars of Clay walks that tricky tightrope between the mainstream and Christian rock worlds more carefully and competently than most. The band revisits a punchy rock sound here, and struggles at times with lyrics that doesn’t always escape Christian rock conventions and musical hooks ready-made for radio. But the album picks up guts and steam in the second half. “Oh My God” builds from a whisper-quiet falsetto

to a trembling, tumbling prayer that laments senseless suffering, while the album closer, "Water Under the Bridge," marks a satisfying coda, coasting on a river-placid hook that dries like storm-drenched summer pavement, leaving only Dan Hasletine's gravelly, unadorned vocal.

With parody musician "Weird Al" Yankovic as a hero, MC Lars has created a wise-cracking rap album that is so clever it might be the official theme of college humor magazines everywhere. "Download This Song" decries the outdated thinking of record company moguls (and has a fascinating real-life parallel, since Lars is helping to pay the legal costs of a teenager sued by the record industry for downloading Lars's music). "Ahab" is the first-ever rap retelling of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, while "21 Concepts" has Lars ticking off a list of involved song ideas that never quite materialized. Lars also narrates a hysterical rap opera, "Signing Emo," about a major label trying to sign a trite modern rock band.

Journalist-musician Jai Agnish has a literate, grainy sound that's tough to pin down. It combines loops reminiscent of Philip Glass with programmed electronic textures, acoustic guitar and a wobbly, compelling singing voice. Marimba enters the mix on "Changes," a song in which the drum machine crackles like a backfiring jalopy and the mood suggests a frolic through a valley of sun-splattered tinsel. "Yellow Balloon" has a hypnotic groove worthy of its playful title, and "Known You" strips away the dense layers to a foundational guitar and vocal, creating a frail folk gem worthy of big-sky daydreams and prayers: "Everything is known to You / Even before I speak a word / Even before I make my move / Here's to wishing that I had known You much better than that."

With a whispery yet tuneful voice flashing the occasional theatrical hiccup, Regina Spektor dispenses keyboard-based pop that runs the gamut from perky, quirky soul to plaintive, gospel-tinged piano balladry simmering with tension. "Samson" retells the biblical drama from Delilah's point of view, employing bizarre lyrics in a moody meditation of piano and strings (e.g., "Samson went back to bed / Not much hair left on his head / Ate a slice of Wonder bread / And went right to bed"). A dominant feature is Spektor's penchant for unfurling surprises at many a turn. Some are less endearing than others ("Après Moi" plays like unintentionally comic film noir).

Blending more righteously than red beans and rice, English singer-songwriter Elvis Costello and New Orleans soul legend Allen Toussaint unite in an effort born of the heartbreak and smoldering passion of a post-Katrina Crescent City. Toussaint brings a gospel flavor to much of the proceedings, his piano lending worshipful flair to

songs such as “Freedom for the Stallion” and “The Sharpest Thorn,” the latter resembling a musical collision between revelers and mourners on a French Quarter street: “Although we know we must repent / We hit the scene and look for sins that haven’t been invented yet.” With its themes of redemption, restoration and rising above, this album far outclasses standard pop fare.