ROLLING STONE

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THE MISSING CHAPTER OF ANTHONY GREGG'S ROCKWORK RANGE

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an art form rock & roll music can be, this Blast of Silence will resound in your very soul. —Anthony DeCurtis

Without the ineffabilities of heart and soul, intellectualism is just a lot of big words. —Laura Fissinger

AGUA DE LUNA
Rubén Blades y Seis del Solar
Elektra

NEVER ENOUGH
Patty Smyth
Columbia

Even though Rubén Blades’s English-language debut isn’t due for a while yet, the Panamanian salsa star, lawyer, essayist, activist and actor has already been begrudgingly the U.S. Anglo intelligentsia. They’re rightfully enamored of his first two major-label releases (Bucando América and Esencia) and his credentials, particularly his cachet with the likes of Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez. Agua de Luna, in fact, is a series of poems and character studies inspired by some of Márquez’s short stories.

Blades’s status as a darling of the smart set shouldn’t make the general public wary of him. Agua de Luna works just fine as highbrow art, but its real import lies in its accessibility to both high and low. Agua de Luna coaxes the listener toward that place in the human psyche where personal passions give birth to political thought and action and where politics, in turn, shape personal passions. In each of Agua’s eight librettos, Blades shows that the separation of “head” and “heart” in North American culture is arbitrary, that head and heart, in fact, complete each other.

Agua’s sole problem is a uniformity of melody and tempo — in contrast with Blades’s first two albums. It’s entirely possible, of course, that he wanted to use a certain homogeneity to underscore the connective tissue between central themes. There are several: the soul-staining repercussions of political immorality (“Laura Farina”), the paralysis of collective resignation (“Blackamión”), the difficulties of living a conscious life (“No Te Duermas” (“Don’t Fall Asleep”)) and the redemptive power of surrender to spiritual mysteries (“Agua de Luna” (“Moon Water”)).

It’s questionable that this album will vault Blades into mainstream stardom in the U.S. — but the eventuality of that fame seems beyond question. Perhaps Agua de Luna is a prelude to fame, a precursor with a crucial message: intellectual mastery is a means, not an end.

IF SINGER PATTY SMYTH WANTS TO shape a distinctive career for herself, as she makes clear at every turn on her solo debut, Never Enough, she had better stop lending her sparkly voice to such faceless projects. Fronting the now-defunct Scandal, Smyth brought gritty intelligence and formidable chops to mostly indifferent material. Here, Smyth gives competent-verging-on-inspired vocal performances, but she still seems altogether lost in search of something worthwhile to sing.

Producers Rick Chertoff (Hooters, Cyndi Lauper) and William Wittman (The Outfield, Graham Parker) have erected a wholly artificial atmosphere of synth-heavy arrangements. Hooters Rob Hyman and Eric Bazilian co-wrote the title cut, which has the same mix of derivative hooks and empty lyrics that distinguished the Hooters’ Nervous Night. This opener sets the tone for Never Enough. The anonymous, so-tasteful writing and playing that album have a blurring effect; these songs are so similar they seem interchangeable.

There are two exceptions, however: with better direction Smyth may have a future. Tom Waits’s “I Put A Spell On You” is a more dangerous choice than most of the slop here; it’s the ambition that led Smyth to a choice that bores best. Of Smyth’s self-titled version, but her street-smart voice bites chunks out of the number. Willie Nile contributes “Sweet Insipid Insane” — a slab of insouciant hard rock with a verbal story to tell. Waits and Nile supply much of the new material; Smyth’s version is one of the best.

—Jimmy Guttman

Just Released

The Return of Bruno. Bruce Willis. Motown. Moonlighting’s charming leading man has come up with an utterly charming, altogether useless piece of soul-pop pap. On the lame cover of the Staple Singers’ “Respect Yourself,” June Pointer does a helter-skelter lot more than does the record’s nominal leader. The Return of Bruno is bad enough to make one yearn for the Blues Brothers, or even for Don Johnson.

Men and Women. Simply Red. Elektra. The second helping from Mick Hucknall and the gang sounds stronger and more consistent than their smash Picture Book debut, but at first listen Men and Women lacks obvious standouts like “Holding Back the Years” and “Money’s Too Tight (To Mention),” the first single. “The Right Thing,” along with “Shine” and “Ev’ry Time We Say Goodbye” (a classic Cole Porter ballad) are among the most impressive tracks.

NOT THAT LONG AGO, XTC WAS a perfectly balanced band. It incorporated it

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