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Sonic Youth / Ciccone Youth / Thurston Moore

Sonic Youth / The Whitey Album / Psychic Hearts
Geffen
1982/1988/1995
B+/A-/A-



The best never last long enough." -- Robert Christgau, review of *Sonic Youth, The Village Voice*, 1982.

Out of context, the Dean's statement may appear wistful, perhaps a lamentation about the rather short length of this "mini-LP" instead of the eye-rolling dismissal it truly was. I'm sure had someone told him that this little slice of New York incorrigibility would not only persist but that the band behind it would become such a potent force in the history of underground music that it would be reissued and expanded a quarter-century later, he might have deigned to give it more than a "C." In hindsight (where I have the pleasure of being), the statement resonates as a smirking irony. Sonic Youth has lasted so long that their name is now a charming anachronism, surviving the perils and pitfalls that so many other names from the eighties underground crumbled into to become an emblem—one of the few to thrive, grow, and ultimately be rewarded for it without tempering the passion and intent that initiated the process.

New York City 1982 was in the grips of a post-punk disco-funk seizure that would not sound completely unfamiliar to those who got caught in the nostalgic flare-up of a few years ago. The no-wave scene, which consisted of perhaps tens of people, had disintegrated—as movements without rules, structure, or boundaries were wont to do. The existential dread that typified the nation's urban enclaves, shielded from Reagan's Morning in America by towering skyscrapers and a rising cloud of hard drugs and *Warriors*-level street violence, had begun to form. It pervaded and perverted even the slickest of Studio 54 bass grooves as their muffled, cast-off remnants drifted down the gutters of the East Village to hoards of disaffected bohemians who patched together the pieces with shards of angular guitar detritus dumped from the abandoned lofts of groping scenester wannabes. Sonic Youth developed in the middle of this environment, were immersed in it, and while they are of it, they were not exactly about it.

Sonic Youth has the feel of those sounds, right from the beginning, and yet there's a slow creep across the record away from them, taking the already twisted and mangled pieces of their cobbled-together influences and making them new. The no-wave concept of amateurism and independence was strong, rooted in the "anyone can play" dictums of Ramones punk-rock, but it also created something of a paradox. While punk-rock's populist ideals meant that any enterprising 14-year old with a second-hand guitar could, by paying close attention to the record, sound *exactly like Dee Dee*, the further progression of no-wave toward the idea that anyone could participate and didn't need to adhere to any kind of formality meant that the songs on *Sonic Youth* would be almost impossible to replicate in your bedroom. It was so ruthlessly individualistic and of-the-moment that the songs existed as ephemeral impulses, not as templates or instructions. It was the spirit that was to be followed, not the specific sounds.

The very first song the band ever unleashed, "The Burning Spear," embodies this idea so well, as even the members of Sonic Youth are incapable of accurately replicating it as it sounds on record to this day. The grating, groaning whine that scuffs up the song was created on a whim by plugging an electric drill into a distortion pedal—shortly thereafter, the drill they used broke, forever changing how the song would be arranged.

In spite of the harshness of the songs, they still sound remarkably bouncy, thanks to the informed drumming of Richard Edison, who presumably felt that if audiences came looking for the Bush Tetras, he might be able to hold their attention while Lee and Thurston snarled through their Branca-fest. Edison, who'd later go on to greater notoriety as the hot-rod-garage attendant in *Ferris Buller's Day Off*, provides some truly illuminating liner notes for the reissue, giving a fairly amusing portrait of what Sonic Youth's origins were like. His perspective is welcome, as he has had the benefit of being on the outside of the band's subsequent ascent.

"I Dreamed I Dream" is a gorgeous foreshadowing of the beautiful, meditative



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compositions the band would produce on *EVOL*, almost like a nascent "Shadow of a Doubt," as Kim and Lee drift in and out of the wavy flow of the song's steady surge. "I Don't Want to Push It" is a lie—it does just that, tossing reams of atonal, dissonant shred over an already busy backbeat. The original *Sonic Youth* is brief, but it's the sound of an eventual giant staggering to its feet, rumbling and thrashing, producing an impressive amount of noise and force with just a few scant motions, ultimately crushing everything in its way.

The expanded items are a nice addition, a collection of six live tracks and one studio cut, many of which come from the earliest moments of the band (as evidenced by their dubious audio fidelity). They provide a clearer, less claustrophobic picture of what early live Sonic Youth was like than *Sonic Death* (though that release is worth the scary journey). The only disappointment is that they didn't include the infamous B-side from the 1987 cassette version of *Sonic Youth*, which consisted of the LP's five songs played in reverse. Not essential for sure, and those of us who are dedicated can simply flip it through the magic of readily available computer software, but there's almost enough free space remaining on the disc that it would have been a cute addition.

Though some people are content to ignore *The Whitey Album* as an aberrant bump in the road of Sonic Youth's illustrious 80's output, it's unfair to the material it contains to do so. It's a giddy, unrepentant stab at once again incorporating the sonic stew of inputs and cognitive dissonance that were feeding into the band's brains into something unified, something whole. Whether it works or not is up for debate, but the album is a meaningful look at those confused ideas, a paint-splatter shotgun blast of talent and creativity on record. As a side note, it's amusing to see the FBI anti-piracy warning on the back of the reissue, when the band didn't bother to clear their Madonna samples with the proper authorities at the time. I'm sure Mr. Geffen has paid due to Ms. Ciccone for this release, but it seems at odds with the spirit of the record. At the time, it was rumored that she personally intervened to hold her record company's lawyers at bay, even then knowing how to correctly cultivate a mystique.

The Whitey Album is "I Love the 80s" through the art-damaged filter of Sonic Youth, the prevailing thematic centerpiece of Madonna serving only as an umbrella for a slew of references to pop culture like *Platoon*, *The Cosby Show*, Robert Palmer and his band of identity-free supermodels, the collected sounds of an FM radio scan, and the burgeoning influence of rap and hip-hop culture as it spread from New York City to the rest of the world. Thurston (credited as the Royal Tuff Titty) makes the requisite awkward-white-punk attempt at rapping. Have you noticed when the punks try to rap, they usually talk about off-kilter, surreal images like Joe Strummer's lobster-shooting Italian mobster or Debbie Harry's car-eating Martian? It's an unfortunate sign of not quite getting it. The Royal Tuff Titty restrains himself to mostly shout-outs (though the later *Master-Dik* EP would show his lovely stream of consciousness in full bloom), and frankly, it's adorably earnest. It's not mockery or parody; he just digs this new sound and runs with it.

It's easy to see why "Two Cool Rock Chicks Listening to Neu" might invite some scorn, but it's really a very funny lead-in piece to Kim's take on "Addicted to Love." In retrospect, one might see the "male white corporate oppression" of "Kool Thing" embodied by the business-suit clad Robert Palmer, forcing those poor women in his faux-video band into the same cookie-cutter, conformist mold. Kim's rendition is straight from the karaoke machine, with the synthesized synthesizers loping along merrily as she seals her top-40 mash note with a derisive kiss. Kim keeps it up on a new version of "Making the Nature Scene" that doesn't seem nearly as gloomy or fatalistic as the cut on *Confusion is Sex*—it's slicker, brighter, and yet saddled with torrents of noise and records scratching, signifying that perhaps the city that inspired the song has emerged from the dark dread into something more vital and inspiring.

The Whitey Album is a tremendous compilation of the world it was born out of, completely irreverent and yet totally in awe of the cultural behemoth that stood before a still tiny and relatively unknown Sonic Youth. By the time the album reaches the brilliant proto-mashup/cover "Into the Groovey," it's screwed and chopped your brain into mush, ready for new seeds of thought to be planted deep within its cortexes.

Psychic Hearts, Thurston's 1995 solo effort comes from the other side, the side of time that comes after their defection to a major label, after punk "broke" and Nirvana unleashed a wave of alternative styling that even Sonic Youth had to answer for on *Dirty*. It bears an unmistakable similarity to the full band's 1995 effort *Washing Machine*, with distinctly punctual strumming and quirky pop-experiments, but for a man who comprises such a large percentage of what makes the band what it is, he's still able to find his own album some space to breathe.

In fact, *Psychic Hearts* is in some ways a more successful record than *Washing Machine*, which seemed to constantly be on the fence about whether it wanted to be radio-friendly or not. "Ono Soul" pays tribute to the "queen of noise" without a single caterwaul or shriek, instead following a simple, tuneful melody through a delightful example of what the best mid-90's alternative rock was (or should have been). These songs jangle! There's none of the questionable aura that *Dirty* had, just a collection of wonderfully accented songs that exude uncomplicated beauty and sonorous sonic love.

"Elegy for All the Dead Rock Stars" is a spiraling 20-minute instrumental closer that sounds like the inspiration for every Explosions in the Sky song ever written. The sparkling, shimmering guitar melodies circle back over themselves as an incessant marching beat increases the tension and intensity of the song's slowly climbing momentum. After a short divergence in the middle where it gets a little jammy, the song finds its footing once again, making it a worthy counterpoint to "The Diamond Sea," and a must-listen for post-rockists.

After almost 25 years, the Sonic Youth family has grown, from teenagers to adults,

- LOL - Joe Swanberg
- Superbad - Greg Mottola
- I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry -...
- You Kill Me - John Dahl
- Rocket Science - Jeffrey Blitz
- The Invasion - Oliver Hirschbiegel
- Alibi - Roland West
- On the Silver Globe - Andrzej Zulawski
- Ace in the Hole - Billy Wilder
- Rush Hour 3 - Brett Ratner
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into parents (both biologically and as a musical influence), and finally into icons. It's a long way from the dank downtown clubs they found themselves on back then, but their devotion to their music, their unrelenting passion, and their uncompromising savvy, have allowed them to continue to thrive into the new millennium. Though they are no longer youths, it's no matter—the best never last, the best change, evolve, and persevere. The best are timeless.



Reviewed by: Michael Patrick Brady
Reviewed on: 2006-03-30
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