

## Alternative Pop

► *Never Going Back to OK*

The Afters

INO Records (Provident-Integrity)

0-00768-43062-0

Fans of Mute Math will appreciate *Never Going Back to OK*, the sophomore effort from The Afters. The Mute Math sound—alternative pop-rock with heavy guitars and occasional keyboards—is particularly noticeable on the early tracks, including the title track, “Tonight” and “Keeping Me Alive.”

A number of the other songs are a bit more pop-rock minus the “alternative”—standard fare that’s a bit too forgettable. But that’s the exception rather than the rule. “The Secret Parade”—the band’s opening salvo—sounds like something by the Beatles’ Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band, while the final track, “One Moment Away,” also exhibits the famed British group’s influence.

The most poignant moment on the album occurs on “Forty-Two,” a song that’s

## TopPick

► *Salvation Station*

Newworldson

Inpop Records (EMI CMG)

8-04147-14222-3

## Blues

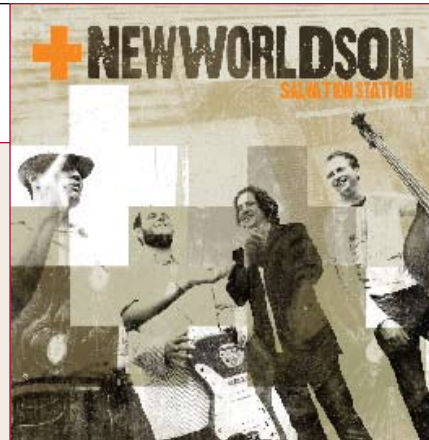
Here’s a recipe to try this year. Put the following in a blender: Stevie Wonder’s greatest hits, Harry Connick Jr.’s *Star Turtle* album, The Blind Boys of Alabama’s *Down in New Orleans*, a few guitar riffs from B.B. King, the swagger of a Memphis rockabilly band and the spirit of Jerry Lee Lewis. Mix for 45 minutes and enjoy.

What do you call it? *Salvation Station*, the incredible debut album from Newworldson. *Salvation Station* is a bluesy return to the roots of gospel and rock ‘n’ roll, an album that stands at the nexus of those genres and reminds listeners of gospel’s profound influence—both its musical and rhetorical impact—on popular music. It’s also a reminder that the gospel is dangerous, wild and even—heresy alert—fun (gospel does mean “Good News”).

Look no further than “Waitin’ Til the Rapture Come,” a tune that is less “Wish We’d All Been Ready” and more “it’s the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine.” This album not only rocks—it also surprises with rich vocals, occasional beat boxing and even a Kazoo solo. If this album isn’t at least nominated for a GRAMMY next year, it will be a shocking omission—it’s just that good.

musically not as interesting as the others, but has some special moments, particularly the bridge (“Will you tell me what this life is all about? Will you show me how to make

my time count? ... ‘Cause I want to feel alive”). Finally, “MySpace Girl” is a song that’s completely out of place, yet so enjoyable it’s easy to see why the band included



it. All in all, this is a very good effort by The Afters and a recommended pick for 2008.

## Praise &amp; Worship

► *Generation Unleashed*

Generation Unleashed

Maranatha! Music (Word Distribution)

7-38597-19502-0

Generation Unleashed is a worship movement and band based in Portland, Ore. On its live, self-titled album, this young



band unleashes a big, guitar-driven praise & worship set that sounds similar to the reincarnated Parachute Band.

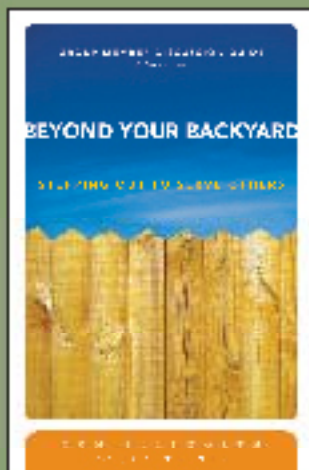
The emotion of the live recording translates well to the listener. While the sound mix seems a bit off at times, the instruments are big and full.

This album is at its best when the male vocals take a backseat, such as on “All Things Through Christ” and on “I Worship You.” The female vocal captures the poignancy of these songs much better than the male. Such is the case again on the final song, “I Love You Lord,” a beautiful rendition of the classic praise & worship song.

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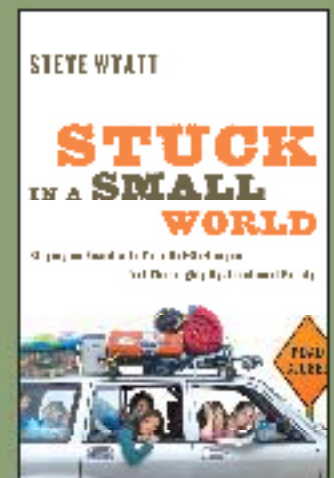
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Overall, this is a solid live album notable for its youthful exuberance, good musicianship and nonstop sincerity.

► **Great Things**

**Ken Reynolds**  
Integrity Music (Provident-Integrity)  
0-00768-43432-1

Reynolds' debut album, *Great Things*, is a mostly live recording from Resurrection Life Church in Grandville, Mich., where he is worship leader. Reynolds was featured in 2007's *For You I Live*—another live recording from Resurrection Life Church—but this is the first album to bear his name alone.

*Great Things* is an upbeat collection of praise & worship songs similar in style to those of Israel and New Breed. However, while the musicianship and the choir are great, this album suffers from some weak vocals and too many songs that sound ready for the supermarket aisles.

Interestingly, that's not the case at all on the last two tracks—both of which were recorded in a studio. On "Holy One," Reynolds finds the range that suits him best, and the song doesn't feel cavernous, like many of the live numbers. Final track "Does Anybody Here (Remix)" has an exuberance that the live numbers—despite big horns and rocking choir—often fail to fully capture.

Reynolds shows enough promise to interest die-hard fans of praise & worship to look for signs of greatness ahead.

**Rhythm & Blues**

► **Life By Stereo**

**J.R.**  
Cross Movement Records (Provident-Integrity)  
8-81413-00312-9

What we have here are two albums in one by recording artist J.R. Both go by the name *Life By Stereo*, but the first third of this 17-song effort is a wildly creative, Black Eyed Peas-type collection of R&B, rap, rock and electronic songs. It's awesome and will appeal to a huge audience.

However, the next two-thirds of the album are decidedly different. It's still good, but a more traditional set of R&B that seems to deviate from the "stereo" theme—distorted sounds from a boom box—which J.R. was building.

That's not to say that things get boring. "We Need You" sounds like a dcTalk song, "When the Thrill Is Gone" has piano moments that channel Kenny Rogers' "Lady," and "Never Lose" is a straight-up praise & worship song.

While this album is all over the map, one thing is certain: J.R. is one of the most talented names in Christian music that no one knows. For that reason alone, this album—schizophrenic or not—deserves a

good listen. And there are enough brilliant moments here to merit listeners' appreciation, no matter what type of music they prefer.

**Rock**

► **The North Pole Project**

**Number One Gun**  
Tooth & Nail Records (EMI CMG)  
0-94639-50782-5

Number One Gun makes emotive rock reminiscent of Copeland or Fireflight (but

with a male vocalist), and *The North Pole Project* is no exception. The band sometimes sounds more emo-pop, but rest assured, this band can rock.

*North Pole* has some beautiful moments, many of which can be heard on "The Best of You and Me," an electronic-pop ballad that ditches heavy guitar work in favor of a more nuanced, quiet sound.

"Thank You for Ending" features the return of big electric guitars, but then offers listeners a surprise piano moment, and the band is at its best when it is unpredictable.

Some songs manage to be both meandering and predictable, but when they're not, look out. Such is the case on "Thank You for Ending," a song that takes a while to find its stride, but when it does, is wonderful. However, the best song might be "This Holiday"—perhaps the only true pop song.

Overall, this is an entertaining, interesting album—albeit an uneven one—that will be appreciated by fans for its edgy, melodic rock-emo-pop sound. Number One Gun is a talented band worth keeping an eye on.

—Reviews: Cameron Conant



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