

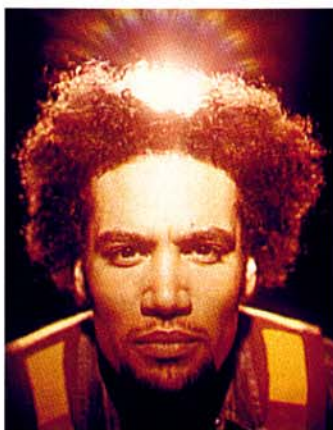
It Happened in an "MMM Bop"



Les Enfants Hansen are jammed in a Paris hotel room, talking to the States by phone and doing what comes naturally these days: press. Tulsa, Oklahoma brothers Isaac (16), Taylor (13), and Zac (11) make up Hansen, the newest rage to hit MTV, David Letterman, and CD stores. Their first single, "MMM Bop" (which means "in an instant" in Hansen speak), swept the radio world when it was released in late spring and made people dance on the spot. Who knew that a group that appears to be a couple of Partridges short of a full bus would be so—OK, I'll say it—good. Their debut album is called *Middle of Nowhere* and was co-produced by the Dust Brothers (Beck's *Odelay*) and Steve Lironi (Black Grape and Space). It also features songs from folks who have worked with Aerosmith, Belinda Carlisle, the Righteous Brothers, and the Animals. It's lighthearted pop and doesn't try to be anything else. But don't think these guys are ready to be—gasp—teen idols.

"We're not striving for that. That's only a positive [because] you get the girls. But the music speaks for itself," guitarist Isaac says. Still, age does pose a problem: Taylor (who sings "MMM Bop") faced a voice change mid-record. "I couldn't really do anything about it, so we just had to work through it," Taylor says, his voice now husky. Little brother Zac, who plays drums, faces a more serious crisis in Paris. "We just ordered some pizza. Did you know that pepperoni means pepper in French?" says the exasperated 11-year-old rock star. "Pepper pizza? I'm not into that!" Next thing you know, he'll be demanding all the brown M & M's that Van Halen rejected.

—Michael Castner



Sincerely Good

Ben Harper • *The Will to Live* (Virgin)



If there is one crucial thread that weaves throughout Ben Harper's albums, it is not necessarily the obvious—the signature Weissenborn (a steel-necked lap guitar) the singer/songwriter employs on most of his songs, or the delicately poetic lyrics he relies upon to convey brutally honest truths. With Harper, the sincerity of his sentiments seems to get together his recordings. Recorded largely on the long road he has toured for nearly two years, *The Will to Live* is indeed a departure from *Fight for Your Mind* and *Welcome to the Cruel World*, his first two albums. Where and with whom he toured surely played a role in this. From Europe to the South Pacific,

Harper has opened for PJ Harvey and Pearl Jam in his quest to communicate. And this new album perpetuates the notion of Harper as a traveling missionary. At times, seemingly less cohesive than *Fight for Your Mind*, this effort witnesses Harper's dip into horns and a jazzy vibe, "Mama's Trippin'," the usual folk tale "Widow of a Living Man," and the typical guitar-driven affirmations, such as the title track, "The Will to Live." Though still without a major hit stateside, Harper has produced yet another album that makes a quieter, though inevitably much longer-lasting, impression.

—Rebecca Kraus

Subtle Surprise

Shipp/Mitchell • *2-Z* (Thirsty Ear)



Today's CD landscape doesn't reflect the importance of sax player Roscoe Mitchell (born in 1940). A major force during the Free Jazz heyday (first with the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, then in the Art Ensemble of

Chicago), he has made few recordings in recent years (unlike his AACM colleague Anthony Braxton, whose every gig seems to have been documented). So this outing with pianist Matthew Shipp commands unusual interest.

Taped in 1996, *2-Z* is a sequence of 11 untitled studio improvisations. The set opens and closes in riotous discord—long slurred alto lines against pounded left-hand piano clusters. (The first of these ends more arrestingly, with Mitchell's stabbing theatrical phrases.) In between, the music is sometimes delicately organized and executed; it moves in tiny blurts, with striking dabs of color. No. 4 is the most conspicuously gorgeous track of this type (Mitchell's soprano sax soaring above a stalking piano), but No. 2's breathy, fragile tones and Morse Code accompaniment are just as distinctive. Shipp played in Mitchell's group Note Factory, and their rapport is filled with subtle surprises; they rarely mirror each other.

2-Z's sound is OK, but not equal to the quality of the playing.

—Walt Mundkowsky

