

Jewelled Antler collective as a member of Thuja. There was a time when that shaggy scene of free folk, as it was approximately known, was very much in vogue, but if that time is long gone, Smith has maintained his irregular path, and can now claim a quarter-century of releasing records.

In The Spires is the first under his own name for several years, following an assortment of related pseudonyms whose distinction from one another are not obvious to the casual listener: Ulaan Janthina, Ulaan Khol, Ulaan Markhor, Ulaan Passerine. While callbacks to Smith's large back catalogue abound, he cleaves a little closer to folk of the less psychedelic, more structured kind. The stern bombast and leaden strumming style on a few numbers – album opener “Needle In The Pin Field”, mid-LP cut “Wellheads” – in fact echoes neofolk, and if that's offputting (neofolk being a subgenre one could politely call divisive) it doesn't hold across the whole album, plus there are no vocals to contend with.

“Boxing The Compass” is notably uptempo, with a Celtic lilt; “The Bishop Sea” borrows from Cretan traditional number “Oso Varoun Ta Sidera”. The desert-bound drift which characterised a fair whack of his early work is recalled with the keening, solemn “In The End”, and this self-produced session finds Smith taking the title of multi-instrumentalist seriously, with bouzouki and two types of psaltery among his arsenal of stringed things. In spite of its literal title, “Harmonium” has an insistent guitar figure rolling over those drones of muggy air.

But *In The Spires* is by no means all flaxen and organic – “Scaffolds” is spiked with a volley of Moog ambience and closer “Plateau Of Cathedrals” brings plumes of psych feedback like prime Six Organs Of Admittance.

Noel Gardner

Spelling

The Turning Wheel

Sacred Bones CD/DL/LP/MC

It's weird to think that every classic album was new once; that even *Purple Rain* had a street release date. As hyperbolic as the sentiment may seem, taking *The*



Spelling

Turning Wheel for its inaugural spin for the first time gave me the distinct feeling of hearing a record that it's impossible to imagine the world without.

On her third full length as Spelling – her second for Sacred Bones – Oakland based artist Chrystia Cabral summoned a 31-piece orchestra to supplement her infectious R&B inflected synthwave, resulting in a kaleidoscopic slab of self-produced art pop with a decidedly 1970s swagger. There are traces of Kate Bush, Rotary Connection and Bowie in these baroque backlit arrangements. There's even more of something strikingly fresh, however, which appears to be hers alone. On the title track, Cabral's dramatic vocals take centre stage, accompanied by a warbling drone and a gospel choir. The atmosphere is assisted by the fact that there are multiple unforgettable melodies on this album. One such is “Awaken”, which opens with gentle fingerpicked guitar and builds to a serotonin-drenched refrain supported by warm organ: “*All we want is right here/All we need and more/Let your heart surrender/Let your heart transform*”.

An activist with deep roots in the Bay Area's Black and Indigenous communities, Cabral's artistic output is inseparable from her consciousness raising activities. These tendencies reach their full expression on the cosmic keyboard rock of “Revolution”: “*What I want is a fire that never goes out/I've got all this desire in a world of doubt/I need a permanent revolution*”. A loping 4/4 beat builds to a churning crescendo; a clatter of percussion and jazzy piano are blended with recordings of a protest march.

Combining timeless sounds with current cultural touchstones, *The Turning Wheel* portrays our historical moment as simultaneously rife with turbulence and beauty. It's not often that an album comes along that feels this loaded with transformative potential.

Emily Pothast

Three-Layer Cake

Stove Top

RareNoise CD/DL/LP

You may well never have heard a banjo played in the manner Brandon Seabrook plays on the debut *Three-Layer Cake* album. It's not just the speed of his picking (time spent investigating bluegrass will confirm the instrument has shredders galore), more the virtuosity. On “Beatified, Bedraggled And Bombed”, which opens this curious, excitingly itchy jazz trio album, his blurringly fast arpeggios turn on a sixpence before firing off in multiple directions.

Seabrook's profile in the US improv scene – including stints on guitar with John Zorn and Anthony Braxton, and a place in the latest New York based version of *The Flying Luttenbachers* – has taken him from being a teenage Minutemen head to hooking up with that band's bassist Mike Watt. Even if the three musicians,

completed by drummer Mike Pride, were pandemically prevented from meeting in person to record *Stove Top*, what's been stitched together sounds exploratory and joyful. Pride, who also has a Braxton release among his scores of credits, marks himself out on that dizzying opening track with sustained cymbal brushwork. Watt is fairly low key here, but stamps his authority on “Big Burner”, via a crisply wonky post-hardcore bassline.

Rippling ambient guitar, crepuscular bells and glockenspiel enter and leave over 40 minutes, yet it's evident that *Three-Layer Cake* like to rock. “Primary Fuel” is typified by electric guitar discord, though the interplay as a whole maintains a lightness of touch. “Luminous Range – Anxious Valve” is jazz rock of a type you might find on Cuneiform, and album closer “Ballad Of The Gobsnacked” brings riff based drama. Seabrook, Watt and Pride give thanks to the late Eddie Van Halen on *Stove Top*'s rear sleeve, as well they might.

Noel Gardner

Raed Yassin

Archeophony

Akuphone CD/DL/2xLP

Raed Yassin's remarkable new double vinyl set is bookended by two tracks built from recordings of women singing the Koran. Not only is the practice forbidden in certain countries, but Yassin's titles – “Imama Of Dawn” and “Imama Of Dusk” – include a word, meaning the female leader of a mosque, that doesn't actually exist. The opening track takes a Syrian woman's voice sounding like a mosque call to prayer. Yassin collects vinyl recordings of Koran readings, and here he DJs them: starting out spacious, leaving long gaps, he gradually layers the voice into an ecstatic, spinning choir. The effect is extremely beautiful.

“The Rain Prophet” builds on another of Yassin's passions – recordings of solo ney flute. Over a slow, heavy beat on a large Arabic drum, a haunted flute rises higher, above bird calls and whooping electronics. A lute figure refuses to mesh with the drum, creating a heady polyrhythm. A rolling bassline propels “The Cyber Oracle” – it might be Yassin's own double bass – and underpins a mix of old, male voices and flickering electronics that conjures traffic noise. It's an earthy, propulsive jumble, and a sudden women's chant might be a passing procession.

Yassin's raw material here is a precious collection of vinyl, what he calls “colonial recordings” of Middle Eastern music. *Archeophony*, or archaeology in sound, is digging in music. As a longterm curator of Beirut's Irtijal festival, Yassin has impeccable avant garde credentials. But as heard in his PRAED Orchestra! project, he loves to work with elements of Arabic popular culture.

Much of *Archeophony* is dense and steamy – “Book Of Psalms” sounds like some wild ceremony is happening in the

street, always bound up with Yassin's excitable electronics and FX. Then the solo voice of “Imama Of Dusk” takes over, just an ornamental, calligraphic vocal line, surrounded by silence.

Clive Bell

Yat-Kha

We Will Never Die

Lollipopshopppe CD/DL/LP

Yat-Kha are one of the few outfits whose influences allow them to be comfortably associated with the otherwise questionable umbrella terms of world or global music. The band's sole constant member Albert Kuvezin has spent the last 30 odd years making contemporary music from ancient Tuvan traditions, blending his throat singing technique with rock idioms. Idioms plural, because while Tuvan folklore remained deeply ingrained in lyrics and musical motifs, the rock make-up around them has shifted significantly.

During Yat-Kha's early days, Russian composer Ivan Skolovsky steered their sound towards heavy electronics. In the mid-1990s, post-punk and psychedelic rock lent an abrasive backdrop for Kuvezin's astonishingly deep, waving kanzat kargyraa variant of overtone singing. On the killer *Yenisei-Punk* (1995), produced by Public Image Ltd's Lu Edmonds, they sounded like a mash-up of The Velvet Underground, Led Zeppelin and black metal – a sort of precursor to Indonesia's Senyawa. They would never be quite as aggressive or direct again, as richer moods and expansive instrumentals spilled over the next few albums.

We Will Never Die is located further down that path, borrowing from Appalachian music and various American roots rock traditions. Joined by Sholban Mongush on igil – a two-stringed, bowed instrument akin to a cello – Kuvezin crafts songs suffused with warmth, bittersweet folk and the weight of Tuvan history. On the opening “Kongurgai” he booms and vibrates in his lowest registers over striking acoustic guitar licks, the igil's bowed cries and elastic boings of the temir komuz (a Kyrgyz variant of the jaw harp). For the title track, his voice rises and loses some of its grit, but remains the focal point of a cinematic ballad reminiscent of Nick Cave and Warren Ellis's soundtracks.

Elsewhere, “Shartylaam” and “Umyvalsya Nochyu Na Dvore” could be mistaken for Tom Waits, were it not for the soothing effect of their whirling themes and soft thumps. Expansive, earthy tones fill the air here, resonating along bluesy finger plucks on the mournful “Bodap Choran” and shimmering through a gravelly rendition of Black Sabbath's folkish lament from 1971's *Master Of Reality*, “Solitude”. This is one of two covers exclusive to LP and CD formats, the other being a version of The Beatles' “While My Guitar Gently Weeps”.

Antonio Poscic

Erik Bender