

New releases rooted in jazz, folk and rock

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Here is a look at some recent album releases which are now available at Alexandria record stores:

Everything But the Girl: "Idlewild" (Sire CD or LP)

A kind of jazz-influenced light pop from Britain has already made its mark with Sade and last year's breakout, *Swing Out Sister*. If the style has seemed too similar to background music for Sunday morning brunch (the former), or too calculatedly commercial (the latter) for your tastes, try *Everything But The Girl's* new "Idlewild," the most enjoyable, intelligent record the genre has produced to date.

What sets this duo (singer Tracey Thorn and singer-guitarist Ben Watt) apart is the emotional detail of their songwriting. "Idlewild's" lyrics and melodies are often bittersweet, perhaps because the album's best three tracks realistically tackle the various feelings associated with becoming a parent. In the beautiful "The Night I Heard Caruso Sing," Watt writes of becoming a father: "It's hard enough to watch the news let alone explain it to a child." Yet by song's end, a chance encounter with the music of Caruso ("He's almost as good as Presley") changes his mind and he resolves to "sing songs to my child."

"These Early Days" is an unabashed love song from a mother to her baby son, and Thorn is at her most charming as a vocalist when she sings "I hope you never change/I'll call you Jimmy/They'll call you James" to her toddler with almost desperate determination to prevent time from taking its inevitable course. Conversely, "Apron Strings" is a heartbreaking tale of a woman's longing for a child. Even in its lighter moments, "Idlewild" transcends any tendency to become lounge music; it warrants much more attention.

Michelle Shocked: "The Texas Campfire Tapes" (Mercury LP)

No need for a CD release of this one; it was recorded on a Sony walkman at the Kerrville, Texas Folk Festival in 1986. Aside from Shocked's voice and guitar, the only sounds on "The Texas Campfire Tapes" are the constantly



Photo/PolyGram Records

Michelle Shocked

chirping crickets and occasional roar of passing traffic.

While this is an utterly charming atmosphere for a major label release in 1988, the album is ultimately more of a successful curiosity piece than a strong musical statement. Around a campfire, many of Shocked's songs may indeed be worthy of applause; turntable scrutiny simply reveals routine blues and folk workouts on too many occasions.

There are a few notable exceptions. Songs such as "The Ballad of Patch Eye and Meg" and "The Secret To A Long Life (Is Knowing When It's Time To Go)" suggest that Shocked has a keen sense of the classic folk song tradition.

Kenny Vance: "Short Vacation" (Gold Castle LP)

Vance is a former member of 1960s hitmakers Jay & the Americans, and his most visible recent work has been as producer of John Cafferty and The Beaver Brown Band's hits. Given such background, the laid-back, jazzy feel of "Short Vacation" is something of a surprise, as Vance rearranges (in some cases, radically) six rock and roll oldies and delivers three new songs of his own.

Vance has essentially removed songs such as Sam Cooke's "Wonderful World" and The Everly Brothers' "Bye Bye Love" from their rock contexts, and approaches them the way an interpretive saloon singer tackles more traditional (read: older) pop standards. This style makes for a perfectly listenable record, but one which ultimately offers nothing stylistically different from, for instance, the usual Michael Franks album.