

Jefferies's string playing with The Cakekitchen. Field's overdubbed vocals salute the titular breeze warmly, and the song plays on and on, as though duration will keep it around just a bit longer. He sounds like Will Oldham might if he had camping on the brain instead of darkness in his heart. "Arco Iris" layers spoken reminiscence over some mellow picking and birdsong, and finishes with a credit to the backyard where the birds were singing. Field's eccentricity resides more in his willingness to let his gaze rest as long as it prefers rather than any overt strangeness in his point of view.

Tori Kudo is the central figure of Maher Shalal Hash Baz. His preference for untrained accompanists has led to the ensemble being tagged as naive, but this ignores that he's been working this way for over 30 years. Wobbly progress and sudden collapses aren't bugs, they're features. A non-Japanese speaker may be adrift decoding Kudo's singing on opener "Mousou Tokkyu", but there's no mistaking that the game attempt at a skeletal samba is punctuated by impeccably executed strings. On "Switch Back", the backing reverses beneath Kudo's feet. And the rave-up "Sorewo Yamereba" falls apart within a minute, perhaps as a caution against trying this sort of thing at home. Maher Shalal Hash Baz's music seems to be a carefully composed portrait of things falling apart.

Bill Meyer

Low

Double Negative

Sub Pop CD/DL/LP

Low have always been good at having things both ways. First the trio from Duluth, Minnesota showed just how quiet you could go, then turned around and made music cloaked with grimy distortion. They sang about doubt and belief with equal persuasiveness. They banked indie cred and got Gerry Beckley of MOR soft rockers America to sing on one of their records. But in the US post-Trump, the centre's gone and the sides appear to be unbridgeable. On *Double Negative*, vocalist/guitarist Alan Sparhawk, vocalist/drummer Mimi Parker, and bass and keyboard player Steve Garrington jump into the breach and report back from its depths.

The record opens with a filthy, repetitive thump and grind. Presumably electronic in origin, it sounds like a stylus crunching around a runout groove. Parker and Sparhawk's voices flicker in and out of the noise, incomprehensible and barely perceptible, and then the noise gets sucked into a digital vacuum, leaving just a soft keyboard chime to accompany the couple's confession — "I'm tired of seeing things". No matter what side they're on, does anyone in the US nowadays look at the country and like what they see? But looking away isn't really an option. The next song's crunchy beat punches relentlessly down like a punishment while Parker's filtered voice laments "All

that you gave wasn't enough". Facts, institutions, principles and democracy have all been worked hard, and there's plenty of failure to go around.

Some of the songs are just fragments bobbing around in BJ Burton's vocal-shredding, bass-inflating production. Others aren't songs at all, just layers of distressed and polished sounds. Up until now, however sparsely or densely they were arranged, Low's songs have always been exquisitely crafted and scrupulously layered with images and meaning. This time, the songs fight to get out through the sound, and some of them don't make it. The ones that do profess regret and confusion, but they don't solve anything, which is probably the truest thing a song can do right now in America. *Double Negative* stands alongside Yo La Tengo's *There's A Riot Going On* as a painfully honest expression of what it's like to live in a post-truth country and have to call it your own.

Bill Meyer

Mako Sica & Hamid Drake Ronda

Instant Classic/Astral Spirits/Feeding Tube CD/DL/MC/2xLP

This collaboration between one of jazz's greatest percussionists and Chicago free rock trio Mako Sica brings to life a hybrid creativity. The title — Polish for roundabout and also the name of an ancient Spanish city famous for its bridge — was chosen for the manner in which its dual meaning suggests movement and connection between people. Such cross-cultural exploration can also be seen in the work's instrumentation. "Emanation" for example has Chaetan Newell playing congas, electric piano, grand piano, hi-hat, sleigh bells, timpani and a Mayan/Aztec instrument called the teponaztli.

Drake's percussion, as to be expected, provides the foundation. His work just before the halfway point of "The Greatest Gift" establishes a musical centre flexible enough to allow for modulation — reminiscent of a comment the drummer once made about Fred Anderson encouraging him to play the drums as a melodic instrument. Mako Sica prove a match for his contributions: Przemyslaw Krysz Drazek's electric and classical guitars and trumpet on "Dance With Waves" and again on "The Wu Wei" demonstrate his strengths, while Brent Fuscaldo's chant-like vocals add an otherworldly dimension to the music. For the first four minutes of "The Old Book", Drake is alone, then Newell joins him on a second drum kit. The two musicians sound as one. As Newell says, their playing manifested an "ESP-like drummer connection".

A psychedelic rock trio teaming up with a percussionist schooled in jazz, reggae and diverse musical traditions might signal an awkward, unsatisfying fit. In practice, however, it works beautifully. Madeleine Byrne

Drew McDowall

The Third Helix

Dais DL/LP

Drew McDowall was an active member of Coil from the mid 1990s until the early 2000s, and since then he's concentrated on his own solo and collaborative projects. Though substantial moments of fifth solo record *The Third Helix* are similar to his work from that period — "Impulse" and "YLL" are strongly redolent of *Time Machines* — the majority of these eight pieces are something different entirely.

The album begins with "Rhizome". Where his Coil output was largely characterised by slo-mo chill, the trend here is of atoms heating up into movement rather than cooling into longform drones. A cello jabs out a sinister motif — although the spindly effect is that of a contact-miked spider web — and the piece launches into a mixture of revolving tumble and machinery racket, before the sound of the arachnid eventually returns and everything drops sharply towards silence.

McDowall, a Scotsman residing in New York, maintains this sense of rising heat and growing movement with "Tendrils". Shards of noise stab at hidden voices and a subtle cloak of echo sweeps over its surface, holding all of these sonic elements in place. During the middle section of the album, the temperature descends again and these are the pieces that come closest to his Coil output. They are, in fact, the least satisfying things on the record, closer to generic drone.

When the pressure returns for closing tracks "Nothing Is Hidden" and "Immanent", so too is the emotional resonance. The final piece appears to rise around a funeral bagpipe melody, scattered and dislocated voices offering a distant lament throughout. At under two minutes it is the shortest but most effective thing on *The Third Helix*, strangely touching in a way that's not entirely explicable. That swathes of the record resemble Coil is understandable, but of little importance given that the remainder is so different. It's in those moments where the real story is told, where the dynamics crank into a higher gear and push the music from a drift to a more satisfying rumble.

Spenser Tomson

Mothers

Render Another Ugly Method

ANTI- CD/DL/2xLP

Hailing from Athens, Georgia, it's no surprise that Mothers started off sounding like REM's younger sibling. On "Too Small For Eyes", the opening track of their 2016 debut album *When You Walk A Long Distance You Are Tired*, Kristine Leschper's voice drifts over a web of mandolin, ukulele and cello, sadly confessing (as Michael Stipe did on 1998's *Up*) that "I want to apologise/To everyone I meet". Two years on, though, and the band have grown into something ugly and

wonderful. For a start, Matthew Anderegg has woken up, and the now drums like a demon, drawing a huge sputtering beats from his kit, infusing folk music with the jagged lines of post-punk and post-punk.

Leschper's voice is still crucial to the quartet, but she no longer sounds like she's singing from a distance entirely, almost unaware of the time passing track. Take the second song "Papa's in the Gap" where her sighing voice and the scurrying activity of the rest of the band summons weird visions of a lonely figure among folk melodies to herself, next door to a Pere Ubu rehearsal. The same sense of disconnect creeps into the lyrics, built upon non sequiturs and private memories: "Dancing like a child at my parents' place in 1996", she murmurs on the same track, "Patrick runs a red light...". Sifting through these hermetic songs is like coming across a cobwebby box of photographs in an empty home. Tiny fragments of narrative emerge, only to be drowned by ambiguity and absence.

On the label's website *Render Another Ugly Method* is pitched as "an assemblage of personal vignettes and imagined scenarios", smudging the lines between confession and creation, irony and sincerity. Leschper plays on this throughout the album, quoting some anonymous critic on "Mutual Agreement" — "hard to focus, mere highbrow bullshit" — before insisting that she can lead even them to "feel made-up feelings". Elsewhere, hackneyed musical quotations are transformed, becoming something new. "We are in the bathtub", she sings on "Mother And Wife" over what sound pretty close to the well-worn chords of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, "and I am dripping water on your face". For just a moment the familiar becomes alien, shot through with eerie and imagined loss.

Rob Turner

Mudhoney

Digital Garbage

Sub Pop CD/DL/LP

Of all the artistic responses to our current era of high strangeness, some of the most robust have been from survivors of the 1990s alternative rock boom. In 2017 guitarist, vocalist and songwriter Juliana Hatfield released an album (*Pussycat*) dripping with contempt for the new world order tended by President Trump and his ever-shifting roll call of calculated incompetents. More recently the newest album by last month's *Wire* cover artists Low effectively mirrors the so-called post-truth era's perilous conflation of signal and noise.

For their part, Seattle's perpetual adolescents Mudhoney celebrate 30 years of sloppy rockin' by releasing an album that doesn't sound incensed and defiant (how we would like to feel) but appalled, even terrified (how we actually feel). *Digital Garbage* is an honest and oddly selfless document of the time, impressively free from bravado.

Insert your own clichés about how hard