

CDS

By Martin Townsend and Charlotte Heathcote

Versatile Heart ★★★★★**Linda Thompson**
(Rounder/Universal)

The revitalised folk scene continues to throw up new and old wonders. The title track of Linda Thompson's first album for five years blends silver band and rock rhythms around the 59-year-old's beautiful voice. It sets the tone for a wonderfully versatile set, some of it co-written with her son Teddy. **MT**

Awkward Annie ★★★★★**Kate Rusby**
(Pure Records)

Six albums into her career, Barnsley's Kate Rusby continues to frustrate. On traditional material like John Barbury her nakedly vulnerable voice is simply heartbreaking but too many of her own songs marry great lyrics to disappointingly pedestrian tunes. Call in Teddy Thompson! **MT**

Park Bench Theories ★★★★★**Jamie Scott & The Town**
(Polydor)

The singer/songwriter market may seem saturated but Jamie Scott is undeterred, giving James Morrison and Paolo Nutini a run for their money with an album he describes as "a set of songs about what the human heart goes through in a relationship". Park Bench Theories sounds repetitive at times but heartfelt tracks like Weeping Willow should ensure Jamie's brand of

soulful easy listening will be played at dinner parties across Britain. **CH**

Marry Me ★★★★★**St Vincent**

(Beggars Banquet)

A guitarist for Polyphonic Spree and Sufjan Stevens, this is Annie Clark's debut solo album – and what an album it is. Marry Me marries the creativity and musical accomplishment of Regina Spektor or Kate Bush to the orchestral drama of the Arcade Fire and the end result is as eccentrically unique. **CH**

Cained ★★★★★**Various Artists**

(Universal)

Sir Michael Caine is an unlikely aficionado of chill-out music and, when Sir Elton John discovered this, he urged him to release a compilation. It's a fairly eclectic collection, ranging from Eva Cassidy to Bent, with something for fans of accessible jazz, dance or lounge music. **CH**

Joyful ★★★★★**Ayo**

(Polydor)

Ayo is half-Romanian and half-Nigerian but now lives in France, which would explain why her debut album evokes a smoky Parisian jazz club. Joyful belies its chirpy title with a fragile, lovelorn sound and her sweetly soulful lyrics explore heartache and regret. **CH**

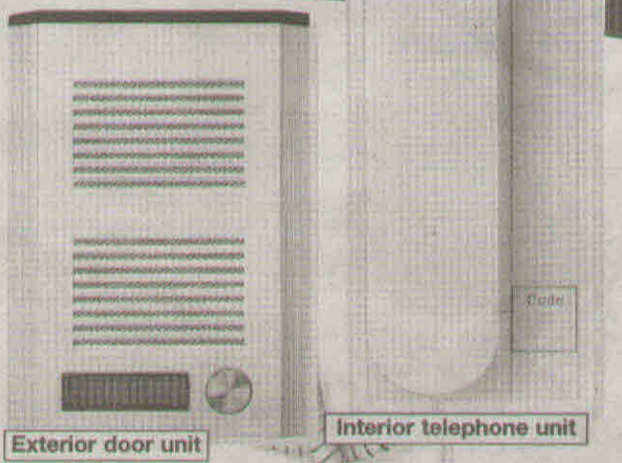
How Monkee-ing around with a winning formula killed the PREFAB FOUR

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By Sean Egan

IN EARLY 1967, The Monkees, to all appearances, were on top of the world. Their singles Last Train To Clarksville, I'm A Believer and (I'm Not Your) Steppin' Stone had been huge hits, as had their two albums. Plus, their madcap television show was at the top of the ratings on both sides of the Atlantic and was being championed by John Lennon. All was not well, though, and the foursome were on the verge of going on strike.

Tensions between the group and the people who controlled their destinies boiled over at a meeting at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Monkee Mike Nesmith became extremely agitated at the attitude of a record company lawyer, Micky Dolenz, Monkees drummer and singer on most of their hits, says of Nesmith in that meeting: "He put his fist through the wall. He said: 'That could have been your face.'"

Dolenz laughs at the memory now: "It was all very emotional and dramatic. Sounds kind of funny now."

The reason for the high emotion was the fact that The Monkees were young men who had begun learning a painful lesson: that all the money, fame and girls in the world can't compensate for a lack of street cred.

The group were being ridiculed as impostors, the fact that they weren't allowed to play on their own records making them seem a throwback to Tin Pan Alley artifice in an acid-drenched, politics-infused time in which there was a huge premium on authenticity in every respect.

"We had no control over anything," says Dolenz. "Not just who played but who wrote the songs, which songs were going

to be released, the album covers, the photos."

Nesmith, a talented songwriter who had already had his work covered by other acts, was furious that promises made to The Monkees that they would be able to write and contribute to the music had not been met.

Dolenz says: "The intent of the producers and creators of the show was that we would play and we would go on the road and we would perform. Then what happened is that there was an internal conflict among the producers, the writers, the record company and everybody when, all of a sudden, there was a lot of money at stake."

To protect the investment, crack session musicians were drafted in and top songwriters hired while the musically inexperienced Monkees were required merely to sing.

The strike was averted: companies in two mediums were dependent on The Monkees' co-operation to keep the money rolling in. The boys were given the go-ahead to supervise and play on

'There was this conflict between everybody when, all of a sudden, there was an awful lot of money at stake'

their third album, Headquarters, which was released in May 1967 and which has just been issued as a 40th anniversary two-CD deluxe remaster with both mono and stereo versions and many rare bonus tracks.

The Monkees was a project that had started with producers Bert Schneider and Bob Rafelson as an Americanised TV version of The Beatles film A Hard Day's Night. However, while the Fab Four's communal living arrangements and jolly japes in that 1964 movie were copied faithfully, the "Prefab Four" (as The Monkees came to be called) were not portrayed as the commercial phenomenon The Beatles constituted.

"The whole show was about this band that was out of work," says Dolenz. "That's an important distinction and was one of the reasons why the show resonated so deeply with kids all over the world because we spoke to all those kids out there that wanted to be The Beatles."

RELEASING records by this fictional group engendered a cross-promotion of product that soon saw the square-jawed Dolenz and his colleagues (lugubrious, woolly-cap sporting Nesmith, sad-faced, straw-haired Peter Tork and diminutive, mop-topped, Mancunian heart-throb Davy Jones) become among the most recognisable people on the planet. Headquarters transpired to be a fine album. Nesmith contributed several strong, if incongruously country-oriented, compositions. Less expectedly, Tork and Dolenz



LONG-LASTING APPEAL: Mike Nesmith, Mickey Dolenz, Davy Jones and Peter Tork in 1966 as The Monkees, an American version of The Beatles, who remain as popular as ever today

also shone. The former co-wrote For Pete's Sake, which became one of The Monkees' most famous songs courtesy of its use in the closing credits of season two of the TV show.

Dolenz provided a remarkable track called Randy Scouse Git that he had written on a trip to Britain and which incorporated in its stream-of-consciousness lyric his meetings with The Beatles, Mama Cass and his first wife, as well as a televisual encounter with Alf Garnett. Released on single as Alternate Title, it made a UK No2. Jones didn't do much musically except bash a tambourine.

After all the struggles that went into winning the right to make Headquarters, The Monkees never played together as a group on their records again. The four Monkees from hereon produced their own



STILL A BELIEVER: Mickey Dolenz in 2007

individual studio sessions, employing their own choice of musicians on them, even if they did frequently use each other as session players.

"It's a bit ironic," Dolenz concedes. "The point of it was not that we had to play every note. It was that we decided who was going to play and what they were going to play and what the arrangement was going to be."

The first result of this novel, possibly unprecedented, fragmentary approach was the album Pisces, Aquarius, Capricorn & Jones Ltd, released in November 1967, also the recipient of a deluxe remaster.

Even more than Headquarters had, it showed a band growing up. Pleasant Valley Sunday seemed like standard Monkees infectious pop but a closer inspection revealed a scathing, socially conscious message. There

was more than one song about groupies. There was also, courtesy of Dolenz, the startling, otherworldly sound of the Moog synthesizer.

"I had the first one on the West Coast," he says. "It had been used before but this was the first time it had ever been used in a rock'n'roll way."

THE result was another fine album but considering that the TV show had given The Monkees a younger demographic than probably any pop group thus far, weren't they worried they might leave the fans behind?

"That's the price you pay," shrugs Dolenz. "You have to continue doing what you want to do or else it isn't genuine."

Money follows art. Art doesn't follow money."

The TV show finished in September 1968 and The Monkees stuttered to a close as a recording unit in 1970. At that point, the band's stock was so low the idea of reissues 40 years later would have been laughable, let alone their lucrative Eighties and Nineties reunion tours and popular re-runs of their show.

Asked if he is surprised at The Monkees' enduring popularity, Dolenz says: "If you look at the pedigree of all the people involved, not including even us, just the pedigree of the writers, the producers, the songwriters, no, I'm not surprised at all."

"There's no formula - you can't just get all those people together and think you're going to do it again because it doesn't work like that. Lightning struck at that one particular point in time."