

MUSIC



Another helping of Ke\$ha

A polarizing pop superstar successfully takes risks on her second album

Ke\$ha
Warrior
RCA
Grade: B



Ke\$ha never had a chance to be considered a credible artist: The debauched tone of her first single, "Tik Tok," led detractors to brand her as nothing more than a vapid party girl puking up last night's glitter. This pigeonholing lingered even though subsequent tunes "We R Who We R" (cheerleader-pop with robotic grooves) and "Your Love Is My Drug" (Swedish pop with an '80s chaser) proved her pop-star mettle and staying power.

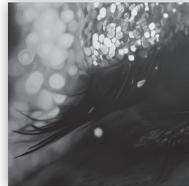
Perhaps being consistently underestimated explains why *Warrior*, Ke\$ha's second album, occasionally feels vengeful. The title track is a surging call for revolution with zippered electro zaps and choppy digital effects, while the scathing "Thinking Of You" eviscerates a former crush ("Found out you were full of it / I'm over it, so suck my dick") by alternating between harsh rock drums and a swaying pop chorus with trilling vocals. During "Crazy Kids," meanwhile, Ke\$ha establishes dual personalities: On the acoustic guitar-driven choruses, she's sweet and melancholy as she reveals her insanity; on the electronic-dipped verses, she un-

loads snappy hip-hop boasts ("I'm no virgin or no Virgo / I'm crazy that's my word, though") to assert herself.

Of course, writing quality tunes is the best revenge on any haters. And although *Warrior* has no shortage of modern techno-pop songs espousing endless love and/or long, magical nights ("Wherever You Are," "Die Young," "C'Mon"), the album takes some bold musical risks. The soul-strut "Dirty Love" is a gloriously unhinged duet with Iggy Pop that finds Ke\$ha unleashing her inner Broadway cabaret singer, while the gooey, '70s-piano-pop ballad "Wonderland" survives (and even thrives) on the strength of her Nashville-esque vocal delivery. And if the guitar-heavy "Only Wanna Dance With You" resembles The Strokes' peppy garage-rock, well, it's because that band's Julian Casablancas and Fab Moretti appear on the song.

Those who already loathe Ke\$ha probably won't find *Warrior* any more endearing than her past work. (Not that she'd care—if anything, the singer seems galvanized by polarized reactions.) But anyone up for giving her a second chance—or recognizing she has actual singing, writing, and performing talent—just might be pleasantly surprised. —Annie Zaleski

Memory
Tapes
Grace/
Confusion
Carpark Records
Grade: A-



During the chill-wave boom of the late 2000s, New Jersey's Dayve Hawk and his group Memory Tapes moved toward the forefront of that burgeoning subgenre by blending blissful synth-pop hooks with lo-fi laptop ambience. But where fellow chill-wave acts like Neon Indian and Washed Out have expanded their sonic ambitions on recent albums, Hawk has struggled to adapt: 2011's *Player Piano* lived in the spacey soundscapes of his 2009 debut *Seek Magic* with live drums and odd instrumental flourishes, but overall felt like an awkward stew of promising sounds that never congealed into actual songs.

With the boldly inventive *Grace/Confusion*, Hawk has either delivered the crowning achievement of his genre, or transcended it altogether. The record's six sweeping, hook-filled epics are un beholden to sonic limitations, endlessly shifting into new realms of sound. "Neighborhood Watch" opens the album with a sleepy barrage of dream-pop guitars, with strummed acoustics and spacey, bent-note leads decaying into miles of reverb. But when the track blossoms into a blaring EDM jam midway through, the dynamic shift feels like a dead end—the lone moment of predictability on an album defined by its subtle yet startling range. "Thru The Field" moves from mild-mannered synth-pop to a trippy instrumental coda that sounds like a B-side from Genesis' 1986 record, *Invisible Touch*; "Safety" builds from glitchy electronics to brooding piano and choral samples, climaxing with a wild guitar freak-out and a spooky vocal hook that falls somewhere between Soft Cell and a Gregorian chant.

Grace/Confusion's tracks are long and complicated, but they feel economical—mostly because of Hawk's finesse with structure and dynamics. Unlike so many of his laptop-fiddling peers, this guy knows how to build a song that breathes. This isn't an album of verses and choruses, but rather moods and movements: "Sheila," the lengthiest and most schizophrenic track, is also the album's purest pop moment. By throwing out the genre rulebook, Hawk is pushing electronic music into weirder, more exciting territory, chillwave purists be damned. —Ryan Reed

The defining opus of alternative rock, 1995's double-disc concept album *Mellon Collie And The Infinite Sadness* captured the post-grunge zeitgeist more completely than any other record. With their androgynous, dead-faced expressions and

Smashing
Pumpkins
Mellon Collie
And The Infinite
Sadness
(Deluxe Edition)
EMI
Grade: B



smothering, distorted guitars, The Smashing Pumpkins embodied Gen-X pessimism, confusion, and repressed anger (all succinctly conveyed by Billy Corgan's iconic "ZERO" T-shirt). But *Mellon Collie* went far beyond the usual noisy disillusionment of youth. Daringly diverse and compellingly grand, the album—running longer than two

hours—developed the genre in strides, achieving sublime occasions of beauty, serenity, and depth, toeing the line of self-indulgence without crossing it. The same cannot be said for the record's new "deluxe" remastering, its magnetic-seal lift-top box brimming with every superfluity and gimmick Corgan could cram in: two books of notes and lyrics, six discs tucked into velvet, and, essential to the crafts-inclined fan, a decoupage kit of expanded album art.

Mellon Collie was carved from a wealth of material—57 finished songs contended for the album's 28 spots—and nearly all of it is here, and more. With demos, live takes, alternative mixes, and previously unreleased material across three additional CDs (named "Morning Tea," "High Tea," and "Special Tea," conveniently coinciding with Corgan's recent foray into the tea-shop business) along with a DVD of two 1996 live performances, the whole ordeal swells to 106 total tracks, an excess that feels less about completing *Mellon Collie's* sprawling concept than about justifying the \$125 price tag. For a record that went diamond and received seven Grammy nominations, there just doesn't seem to be much interesting content lurking behind *Mellon Collie's* curtain.

Skeletal demos of "Bullet With Butterfly Wings," "1979," and others offer worthwhile glimpses at the album's best tracks early in the creative process, but much of the unused scraps taken from the cutting-room floor should have stayed there. Alternate mixes and rough studio takes feel like rudimentary, run-of-the-mill practice sessions rather than evolving iterations. And while there are a couple of quality B-sides and rarities sprinkled throughout (a lush cover of "My Blue Heaven" being a particular highlight), overall, the glut of throwaway material makes the record, in retrospect, seem more overblown than groundbreaking. Though *Mellon Collie's* inflated reissue will surely garner Corgan and company a couple extra bucks from holiday shoppers, it's a disappointingly conventional treatment of an album that once represented unease and discomfort with convention. —Chris Mincher



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