

Arts & Ideas

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Patrick Freyne



The main thing I'm learning is that having an affair is way easier than I thought

Netflix's new erotic thriller, *Obsession*, begins with a silver fox engaging in some complicated, presumably erotic surgery. He's not a literal silver fox, for that would be hideous, but a figurative one named William (Richard Armitage). William is a hunky surgeon, which is one of the many types of hunk you need for an erotic thriller if you're playing by the rules Paul Verhoeven set down in the 1980s.

The word "obsession" then looms at us through the darkness and eerie music plays. It's erotic drama time. Here's the pitch: William, a posh Englishman, is in the thrall of a manipulative femme fatale named Anna played by Ireland's own Charlie Murphy who is pretending to be English. "Good woman yourself, Charlie," is the only appropriate response to this, followed by a few bars of A Nation Once Again.

Now, another thing that's worth mentioning about Anna is that she is William's son's girlfriend. This, I think you'll agree, is very erotic. Yes, it's the 1980s again, baby. A new Fatal Attraction adaptation is debuting next week on Paramount Plus. Elsewhere on Netflix, *Sex/Life* is playing. "Erotic drama" is no longer a nickname your friends had for you behind your back. It's a genre once again. You now have my permission to sing A Genre Once Again (and listen to the excellent Erotic Eighties series of Karina Longworth's podcast *You Must Remember This*).

Obsession is adapted by Morgan Lloyd-Malcolm from Josephine Hart's novel *Damage*. It quickly becomes clear that the reason they made William a

celebrity surgeon is that for much of the show he stands looking dazed and slack-jawed at the edge of social gatherings, gazing across a room at Anna while other people have conversations across him. There's a danger that if he didn't have a high-powered job, we'd think Anna was taking advantage of an older man with a bad concussion.

William's jaw goes slack from the first moment he and Anna catch eyes across a crowded room. They meet at a bar counter and speak breathily and gruntily at one another for a bit before he feeds her an olive with his fingers. This, I think you'll agree, is fierce erotic altogether. He goes to a gym and furiously cycles a stationary bike, which is a great euphemism and one I hope takes off. "Off to furiously cycle the stationary bike," we'll be saying come month's end.

Anna visits William's family in their fancy family house in the countryside. William makes an erotic drink for Anna erotically. Over dinner Anna and William

glare at one another lustily while no one else in the family notices. The main thing I'm learning from this is that having an affair is way easier than I thought.

William goes and does another operation (it's unclear if he washed his hands) and then he gets an erotic text from Anna on his erotic phone inviting him to her friend's erotic apartment. He goes there and they both have very serious, uncomfortable-looking sex on the wooden floor tiles and I find myself thinking erotic thoughts like: "Where did they get those floor tiles? Is that a parquet floor?" This, I believe, is the type of erotic thinking a lot of Irish Times readers can relate to.

More cushions

By episode two, it's clear that the intimacy co-ordinator has seized power and that the director is tied up in a press somewhere, because we open with Anna and William having uncomfortable looking BDSM-adjacent sex against the wall and then facing each other while kneeling on the floor. Then they just lie on the floor naked as William drips cold water from a handkerchief on to Anna because apparently they don't have a bed or a shower.

To be honest, this is all an excellent way of showing the strengths and weaknesses of the property and I had a lot of thoughts about how I'd decorate it. My main thought: more cushions. At one point William rests his chin against an arse (presumably Anna's; it's confusingly shot because even he wants a cushion. He's in his 50s. This is the deep subtext that I'm taking away from these sex scenes: cushions are erotic.

They also have a discussion about the



■ Indra Varma (left) Richard Armitage and Charlie Murphy in *Obsession*; and (below) Steven Yeun in *Beef*.

PHOTOGRAPHS: NETFLIX

"rules" of their various sex games. Light BDSM is big with people who love bureaucracy. There are a lot of rules. Anna even writes up reports in a diary. A little later, William is furiously riding the stationary bike (literally) when she texts him to visit again. When he does so, she tells him a terrible secret from her past and he demands a page from her sex diary, about which he will presumably ride the stationary bike later on.

He then follows Anna and his son Jay to Paris where they are spending a romantic weekend. William feels he can add something to this. He watches them from across the road, then contacts Anna and they have frantic sex in a nearby alleyway. This doesn't happen as often as you might think in *Emily in Paris*. But there's more!

triangle into a more equitable, sex-positive and frankly comfortable love square. But he does not.

Although William doesn't return to London wearing a T-shirt that says: "I went all the way to Paris and had energetic sex with a bed while sniffing a cushion and weeping", he might as well do, because his wife suspects something is up. Perhaps it is the way he continuously gawks at his son's girlfriend. Perhaps it is the amount of time he spends on the stationary bike. The suspicion grows after Anna and Jay become engaged and William starts receiving mysterious texts from a stranger who claims to know his secrets (the cushion thing, probably). This will unravel in the subsequent episodes with all the heteronormative, sex-terrified melodrama of a 1980s erotic thriller and not, sadly, the devil-may-care insouciance of a 1970s sex comedy.

Obsessive behaviour

If you're looking for an excellent show about obsessive behaviour please watch, instead, *Beef* (Netflix) created by Lee Sung Jin. The title is a reference not to cattle's "food name" but to the slang term for acrimonious disagreements. It features Steven Yeun and Ali Wong as two stressed-out strangers who end up in an absurdly escalating dispute over a minor traffic incident in sun-scorched southern California. It tells a darkly comic and surprisingly tender story about economic insecurity and social expectation, all filtered through powerful, ragefully-vulnerable performances from Yeun and Wong and the extended cast. It's deeply original and just very, very good.

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Yes, it's the 1980s again, baby... 'Erotic drama' is no longer a nickname your friends had for you behind your back

New Releases Music



Much more than a welcome return



EVERYTHING BUT THE GIRL
Fuse ★★★
Buzzin' Fly/Virgin

The new album from Everything But the Girl – Tracey Thorn and Ben Watt, who are partners in life as well as in art – arrives almost 25 years after their 10th studio work, *Temperamental*.

On that record, Thorn wrote in her 2013 autobiography *Bedsit*

Disco Queen that she felt as if she had more or less "ended up being guest vocalist on someone else's album"; she had recorded most of her vocals during late-night sessions after the couple's twin babies were in bed.

Since then the pair released solo work. Thorn has written several more music-related books and, whenever either of them was interviewed, they had neatly brushed aside any suggestion of re-forming Everything But the Girl. Yet here we are – it seems the kids can now brush their own teeth and put themselves to bed, and while Watt is as bald as a coot and Thorn's hair is as white as snow, the songs somehow remain the same. This is by no means a

bad thing.

Fuse combines elements of Temperamental's old-school garage house and trip hop, the duo's love of pop-imbued songs and, inevitably, a worldview that has been shaped by their life experiences over the past quarter of a century. As always, an unbroken thread of melancholia stitches everything together, with Thorn's voice deeper (and, occasionally, auto-tuned, for no apparent reason other than that she just wanted to experiment), investing the songs with more world-weary edges that reflect life being lived with all of its sporadic upsets and catastrophes.

As such, while there may be a sense of liberation amid the club

beats and grooves, there is also a contemplative awareness of things going askew.

The contradictory nature of this is apparent in many of the album's 10 songs. Run a Red Light is written from the point of view of a disillusioned club DJ ("a few more weeks and I can work it, keep it simple, keep the same crowd"), while When You Mess Up offers counsel to wayward adults ("Don't be so hard on yourself have a drink, talk too loud, be a fool in the crowd, but forgive yourself").

A very welcome return, then? It's much more than that. *Fuse* is so good a soundtrack it is as if Thorn and Watt have never been away. **TONY CLAYTON-LEA**



KEN O'DUFFY
Sing the Songs ★★★
Rosemary Grove

Ken O'Duffy has earned his title as stalwart of the Irish music scene by now. The former frontman of the Dublin indie/retro-pop act Saville, which he cofounded in Coolock in 1995, O'Duffy has been in and out of bands since the mid-1980s.

It took until 2019 for him to strike out on his own, with the well-received *The Last Night at the Gentleman's Club*. If you are familiar with the Dubliner's oeuvre, nothing on this lockdown-penned second solo album will surprise you: as always,

many of the songs sound like unearthed B-sides or demos by a forgotten 1960s pop band.

The Beatles are a clear influence on *The Fag End of the Day*, as are The Kinks on *Sing the Songs*, a particularly pleasant Swinging Sixties bop that opens with tolling church bells and reflects on the demise of religion in Ireland. *The Night Finds You Alone* sees him adopt a crooner persona on a quietly glamorous Rat Pack-style cabaret number. *The Willow Tree* lurches into sombre balladry, enhanced by a shimmering Rickenbacker jangle.

There is no questioning O'Duffy's capacity as a songwriter, but a strong opening salvo soon gives way to a predictable template as the track list progresses. *Sing the Songs* may sound like an enticing invitation, but you may find you're already overly familiar with the tunes. **LAUREN MURPHY**



DAVID HOWLEY
For Venus ★★★
Independent

The space and time threaded through this solo debut from David Howley of *We Banjo 3* speaks of what might have been a welcome if unexpected interlude on the band's high-octane touring schedule.

This is a collection that's all about reflection and renewal, with Howley willing to reveal his personal vulnerabilities through a swathe of finely honed, often delicate songs. The title track is an intriguing meditation on the heat and sometimes unfiltered foolhardiness of love, set against a spacious backdrop of upright

bass, languorous beats, deep-throated fiddle and guitar.

Howley's vocals set forth on most of these tracks with equal parts indolence and elegance, exploring wide open horizons that are cinematic in scale, summoning images of Harry Dean Stanton in Paris, Texas. Spare backing vocals from Woven Kin (Siobhán Moore and Aisling Urwin) bring further colour and shade of the subtlest kind, grounded by Moore's steady hand as producer.

At times the dreamy soundscape hints at the potential for some of these songs to wend their way into a club setting, in the vein of *Everything But the Girl's Missing*.

Such low-key confidence is a thing of rare beauty in this newly cacophonous world. Howley's introspective mood speaks of an authentic exploration of self, and his solo debut points to a richly creative period that he has embraced to the full. **SIOBHÁN LONG**



JINX LENNON
Walk Lightly
When the Jug is Full ★★★
Self-released

Jinx Lennon's latest album surveys just as many eclectic subjects as his previous work but here takes in the beauty of the west of Ireland, incels, smoking, the press-gang era, noisy neighbours and more.

Yet this record is rooted in surprisingly soft earth for the Dundalk punk poet. It is to be found on the beautiful instrumental *Atlantic Coast Woman*, the delicate atmosphere of *Celibate Rifle Day* and the graceful piano of *A Trillion Ways*.

Brutality is woven through tenderness in Lennon's lyrics, whether he's telling a story about an unfortunate encounter with a hero on Tyrants of the Open String – "I won't bow and scrape" – or expressing his disdain for the cover version on *Sing What You Know About*.

There is a pleasing tension to something like *Pregnancy Test Kits*, with its playful melody and harrowing honesty.

Crisp White Shirt takes its cue from a scene in the British film *Lynn + Lucy*, with militaristic drums beating out the devastation.

Lennon's gift is pulling us into small moments, the kind that stitch a life together, as on the ballad *20 Silk Cut Blue*, about his father's mother, who loved that brand of cigarette; *The Man Who Loved Abba*, about an alcoholic ex-boxer from Belfast who happened to hold the Swedish quartet in esteem; or the glowing and sad *Bonny Iris*, partly inspired by a book he read about the press-ganged Jack Tar sailors. **SIOBHÁN KANE**

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Hancock gets his additional half-hour and now the rest of us have to suffer

Almost a whole UK prime minister ago, former health secretary Matt Hancock crawled from a hole in the ground to appear on I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here! He may have taken a wrong turn. He may have been tunnelling towards "the news". I assume this is just how Matt Hancock arrives everywhere, burrowing from below like a common mole. But this time he was caught on camera, digging up through the soil, spitting insects, grinning with his generic man-in-management face and speaking, as his wont, like a subterranean satnav.

Only journalists watch the news, but everyone watches I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here! (Sunday, Virgin Media One). Andy Warhol once said that everyone would be famous for 15 minutes. Hancock, a man who has already failed spectacularly at his first 15 minutes, was given another go. He got a whole Warholian half-hour. He literally had Hancock's Half-hour.

Throughout his run, Ant & Dec watched from their jungle eyrie and chuckled darkly. If they have views on the ethics of laundering Hancock for light entertainment lolz, they did not share them. These hyuk-ing homunculi represent the spirit of the cheeky, fatalistic Blitz-loving British nation. When the apocalypse comes, Ant & Dec will be front and centre of the TV coverage, making jokes about dread Cthulhu's tentacles as their faces melt and their souls are consumed. I'm only joking. I know Ant & Dec don't have souls. Like the King (the name for the new Man Queen), Ant & Dec

express no political views. Their ideology is a quip, their belief system a chortle, their philosophy a TV rating.

Matt Hancock has been good for that philosophy. He and the Tories mishandled the pandemic and then, to follow up, he broke pandemic guidelines by having an affair with a political aide. So, people were curious. They tuned in to see "the real Hancock" and Hancock was on board with this agenda, striving for relatability at all times.

"We don't come across as human enough," he says at one point, speaking of politicians in general and not, as I assumed, using the royal we. And he's got a point. I cast my mind back to the Tory government that vomited him out and on to prime time: Edwardian cosplayer Jacob Rees-Mogg, haunted ventriloquist dummy Michael Gove, surprised competi-

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His face resembles nothing more than the baby-faced sun on Teletubbies, just now it's middle-aged, adulterous and recently retired from pandemic mismanagement

tion winner Liz Truss, depressed ogre's thumb Dominic Raab and that fleshy, fluffy avatar of human appetites, Boris Johnson. Hancock does seem relatively normal next to that Legion of Evil. He repeats his theme later, with all the dramatic emphasis of a text to speech app: "We are normal people. We do things that normal people do."

Normal things? Normal things like being on I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here, I guess. Hancock probably mistook this for a community project and probably mistook rugby player Mike Tindall, Boy George and Eileen from Coronation Street for "the working class..." He is very keen to show he's just like these representatives of the common man. It's a version of: "If I am cut, do I not bleed?" but it's more: "If I eat a plate of animal genitals, do I not also win plastic stars so B-list celebrities might eat and also £400,000 in cash money?" (apparently that's what he's being paid).

Initially, some of his fellow jungle mates were appalled by his presence. They challenge him on his record in politics but soon they're worn down by his vague and masochistic pleasantness. His face resembles nothing more than the baby-faced sun on Teletubbies, just now it's middle-aged, adulterous and recently retired from pandemic mismanagement. Eventually, surprised that he hasn't overseen any deaths on the show, the celebrities collectively decide that Hancock is "nice". This also seems to be the opinion of the voting public who keep him there until the last episode. A half century on from Hannah Arendt, people are still



■ Matt Hancock on I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here! Above: Ant and Dec watch Hancock taking part in a Bushtucker trial. PHOTOGRAPHS: JAMES GOURLEY/ITV

surprised when the architects of disaster are banal vacuous wonks and not scenery chewing psychopaths. Hancock isn't a Sith Lord who hates freedom, he's just selfish, incompetent and sexually attracted to television cameras.

I missed a few episodes but by the finale there are just three celebrities left. If I know Hancock, the rest probably died unnecessarily from his mismanagement of a jungle pandemic. He now shares the jungle encampment with fellow survivors: dry-witted football champion Jill Scott and sweet-natured soap opera hunk Owen Warner. A typically giggly Ant & Dec arrive to administer their final torments. Hancock gives advice from afar as Scott uses her tongue to rotate yellow stars

while encased in a Perspex box that's swarming with rats. It probably reminds him of his time in government.

Hancock then watches as Warner munches down on fermented duck's egg, meal worms, camel testicle, kangaroo penis and scorpions. "The skin was a crispy nice texture like a crisp; the inside, however, mucus," says Warner, who seems to think this is just foreign cuisine. Warner is too good for this doomed world.

Hancock looks on as though he is envious of this degradation.

Then Ant & Dec submerge Hancock in a tank of water while countless eels, spiders and toads are dumped on his head. But to Ant & Dec's chagrin, cunning Hancock has smuggled in a snorkel and so does not drown. He's been weirdly equanimous throughout the show's various tortures. As a toad sits on his head, it's clear that he's injured to all humiliation. He's a man for whom eating shit has become a skill and a personality trait.

This final trio are emotional come the programme's end. Warner says: "This experience has changed my life." Warner is largely known for being on Hollyoaks, so this feels fair enough.

It seems a bit more dubious when Jill Scott says: "It's just been the best journey ever," given that she was part of the England team that won the Euros just last June. But who knows, perhaps it's true.

It's when Hancock says: "I'm just incredibly grateful." It's been an extraordinary ride. "This!! I start shouting at the screen: 'This has been an extraordinary ride. This!!! You were UK minister for health during an unprecedented pandemic and yet you think THIS was an extraordinary ride!'" It's like Neville Chamberlain saying: "On reflection, I think the most stressful time in my life was doing the Just a Minute Quiz."

It's all wrong. There's something wrong with Matt Hancock. There's something wrong with I'm a Celebrity... Get me out of Here! There's something wrong with us all, really.

New releases Music



OLLY MURS
Marry Me ★★
EMI

The enduring appeal of former X Factor contestant Olly Murs (in 2009, he was runner-up to Joe McElderry) is no surprise.

Albeit not as abrasive or divisive, he is cut from the same cloth as Robbie Williams: outwardly a cheeky, cheery chappie, full of charm and chatter. It's no wonder that over the past 13 years he has successfully juggled a pop star calling (Marry Me is his seventh album) with a string of lucrative presenting jobs on television.

In fairness, Murs is one of those rare X Factor alumni who,

from the start of his recording career, ensured his name was included in the songwriting credits. However, if there's a trick to his continued success it is staying true to not just formulaic pop songs but also adhering to the public view of him as one of life's nice guys.

Marry Me is full of such clichés and perceptions, but Murs (and/or his management) has been canny enough to team up with the songwriting duo of Jessica Agombar and David Stewart (not the Eurythmics guy), who in 2020 wrote Dynamite, the successful song for K-pop stars BTS.

The timing, you might say, is perfect, as due to South Korea's compulsory military service, BTS are now on hiatus until 2025. Expect, then, generic pop music with one eye closed with a cheesy wink, and the other eye wide open, seeking out, laser-style, chart positions.

TONY CLAYTON-LEA



VARIOUS
Rebel Irishwomen ★★★
Claddagh

Women and their roles in the 1916 Rising were, until recently, excised from the history books. Claddagh Records originally released Rebel Irishwomen in 1966, and as we inch towards the end of this decade of centenaries, this updated collection of first-hand accounts from Maud Gonne MacBride, Kathleen Behan and Helena Molony make for intriguing listening.

These accounts are shot through with an indomitable life force and a determination to tell it like it was. Helena Molony's blithe mention of the fact that on the day of the Easter Rising, she didn't need a revolver as she already had her own, sets the tone. The contribution of Maud Gonne MacBride is intriguing too, full of empathy and pragmatic observations: 'the Irish are the best soldiers and the worst diplomats'.

Alongside these all too brief accounts, with slender liner notes, Claddagh have chosen to set four songs from contemporary singers, Niamh Bury and Landless, alongside those from Kathleen Behan, whose timeless declamatory style revives Erin go Bragh with gusto. Bury brings a delicious tone of melancholy to her distinctive reading of Erin go Bragh. Landless' a cappella harmonies add further colour and shade, especially to their entrancing reading of The Tri-Coloured Ribbon.

This is a collection that whets the appetite but feels more like a foreshortened work in progress than a coherent snapshot of moments in time.

SIOBHÁN LONG

Reloaded in his own voice



MAVERICK SABRE
Lonely Are the Brave (Mav's version) ★★★★★
FAMM

Taylor Swift has a lot to answer for. The music industry has been gradually eroding artists' rights – and their earnings – since the dawn of the streaming era.

When Swift's back catalogue was sold without her knowledge, she decided to wrest back control by simply re-recording her old albums. It was seen as a bitter-

sweet victory for acts who have been downtrodden by The Man.

Now, Michael Stafford, aka Maverick Sabre, is following in Swift's footsteps.

The London-born, Wexford-raised soul singer made his name with his stellar 2012 debut but has never received royalties from the album, which was originally released on major label Mercury.

Stafford's career is still a going concern; he released his fourth album earlier this year on his own imprint FAMM, so this is not the act of a has-been musician who has landed on hard times.

Such projects do, however, throw up a conundrum: can the essence of that recording – all of the uniquely charming ingredients that comprise a debut album, from naivety to enthusiasm to

rawness – really be recaptured, a whole decade on?

In this case, the answer is yes – mostly. Stafford was still just 22 when it was released; now, at 32, he can arguably inhabit world-weary songs like Cold Game, Open My Eyes and I Used to Have It All with a hard-won authenticity.

There are minor sonic differences to some tracks. Memories is pitched half a key lower to accommodate Stafford's changed voice, while the punchy edges of Let Me Go are softened by strings on the new version. Others have had a major overhaul. On Sometimes, he raps the verses instead of speaking them.

And just like on the original, not every song hits the mark – the lacklustre I Don't See the Sun gains no new dynamism here.

Still, this album was never intended to be a note-by-note recreation; as Stafford said himself, it was important to "leave space for moments of how I create now".

A decade on, the Wexford man's remarkable voice is arguably better than ever. Songs like These Days and I Used to Have It All continue to mark him out as a superb soul singer, above all else.

There are several demos of new songs and a couple of unremarkable acoustic versions tacked on to make this package more appealing, but really, they're unnecessary.

He may yet release his magnum opus, but this rebound to the past is a fine reminder of the firepower within Maverick Sabre.

LAUREN MURPHY



TEO GHEORGHIU
Roots ★★★★★
Claves CD 3052

Swiss-Canadian pianist Teo Gheorghiu was born in Switzerland and raised in London. But his Romanian surname is the key to where his exploration of his roots took him, to a country he had connected with mostly through music – he cites Dinu Lipatti, Radu Lupu and Taraful Haiducilor. And, after the death of his father in 2018, he chose to journey there, and cycled through Germany, Austria and Hungary on his way to Sandominic in Eastern Transylvania. The musical voyage here begins with the best-known work by the best-known Romanian

composer, George Enescu's Romanian Rhapsody No. 1, nimbly and eloquently performed in the composer's rarely-heard own arrangement for solo piano. Romanian-themed pieces by Bela Bartok follow – the Allegro Barbaro, Romanian Folk Dances and the first of the Romanian Dances Op. 8a. The journey then becomes more personal, with the Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition chosen for its "unique and unconventional universe" and for being "the perfect platform for an enduring exploration of new perspectives, sincerity, and most of all, being fearless in extremes of expression". It's followed by an electronically processed but unpersuasive short piece, Enter the Realm, by George Gurdjieff. By contrast the Mussorgsky sounds at all times fresh, and is delivered in a manner that is probing, thoughtful, unhackneyed.

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Emily in Paris is a work of evil genius. I'm obsessed by it

Let's check in with that guileless representative of American innocence, Emily in Paris. I respect Emily (Lily Collins) because the woman is a stone-cold psychopath. In episode four of the new series (Netflix), she likely kills a customer at her friend's restaurant because she can't tell the difference between champagne and champignons, to which the man is allergic. The man chokes and gasps while Emily protests that it is the French language, not she, that is in the wrong. In fairness, the man's fate is never clarified, but if I know Emily and her friends, he's probably still lying dead on the floor. Later scenes in the restaurant are suspiciously shot from the waist up.

Being "in Paris" is Emily's whole MO and she's been there for ages now. This makes her literally fatal inability to speak French the core mystery of the series. I have learned more French watching Emily in Paris than Emily has learned in Paris while being in Emily in Paris. If, after months eating in the sort of French restaurants *Pépé Le Pew* might frequent, Emily doesn't know the French word for mushrooms, then she needs not better French classes but an MRI. I've not seen anyone less equipped for their habitat since Babe: Pig in the City.

And yet everyone loves Emily. She works in a Parisian marketing business where all meetings are held in English for her benefit. She is so efficient at pointing at things and speaking loudly in English that a core plot point of the season is that both her American mentor and her

French boss are desperate for her to work for them.

Her friends and colleagues are now so hypnotised by her charms that they have Stockholm syndrome and frequently converse in English even when she's not there. It's also possible that Americans think a French accent is the French language and that if we released 'Allo 'Allo for the American market it would win the Best Foreign Language film at the Oscars.

But we're not here for French lessons. If you want to learn about France, read a "book", you nerd. Instead, behold Emily, the sartorial marvel, gliding through the streets of Paris like a triumphant American tank commander flinging packets of gum at the locals. In her first scene of the

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The world of Emily in Paris is a post-scarcity society where Americans don't need visas, and couture clown clothes are available on the French healthcare system. And also, she seems to have killed a man and completely gotten away with it

series, she gazes out from an explosion of pink ostrich feathers, her huge Lol-Doll-size eyes gazing out from beneath her Groucho Marx eyebrows. In another she dons thigh-high lime green waders with a brightly coloured woollen jumper covered in hearts. She looks like she's working on a fishing vessel manned by exotic clowns. At another point she goes to a fashion museum exhibition wearing winged shoulder extensions so wide she looks like she's the centrepiece of an educational diorama about American exceptionalism.

Sometimes, looking at her clothing, I wonder if Emily in Paris isn't actually set in the extended Star Wars universe. Perhaps she's C-3PO's sister or one of the taller Ewoks. Maybe "Paris" is one of those Star Wars planets with one geographical feature – desert, snow, sea – but in this instance the single geographic feature is "Eiffel Towers". It's the "Eiffel Tower" in Emily in Paris that even when she and her colleagues have dinner on top of the Eiffel Tower, I see more Eiffel Towers in the distance.

In fairness, Emily does acclimatise to some elements of francophone culture. From time to time, she accessorises her hallucinogenic fashion statements with berets and stripy tops. I'll be very surprised if she reaches the end of the series without wearing a string of garlic around her neck.

Look, don't get me wrong, Emily in Paris is a work of evil genius. I'm obsessed by it and I think I've figured out the rules that underpin its success.



■ Lily Collins as Emily in Emily in Paris. Below: Collins with Ashley Park and Camille Razat. PHOTOGRAPH: STÉPHANIE BRANCHU/NETFLIX

First, everything Emily does is adorable. This is the whole of the law. Things that in other shows would lead to cringe-worthy comedy of embarrassment lead to perky triumph for Emily. Taking to the stage as a romantic gesture to sing a song she only learned existed moments earlier? She sings it perfectly while looking shy. Probably sending a man into aphylactic shock because she can't speak French properly? That just leads her to a personal realisation about her own self-worth.

Second, Emily in Paris is a smorgasbord of postmodern gestures without an underlying philosophy. It has the referential shape of camp satire, but the satirical point has been distilled out to create something new and slightly terrifying. This can't be accidental. Creator Darren

Inspector Clouseau, Edith Piaf and the hunchback of Notre Dame. But it's never clear why these things are in quotation marks. The writers just seem to be showing off the tropes they know while the meme-savvy viewers enjoy the frisson of pattern recognition wedded to a triumphant story about a prim, wackily clad Girl Boss.

Finally, and most importantly, this leads to Emily in Paris being entirely tensionless. I think that's what makes it so agreeable to the frazzled palates of Generation Z, a cohort who can't afford houses or pensions, for whom the planet was ruined before they even got here. It would be unfair to stress them out on what is possibly the last television show. So Emily never faces any real consequences as she blunders delightfully through the streets of Paris dressed like a cast-member from *Starlight Express*.

After betraying both her bosses, they still want to work with her. After sleeping with her friend's boyfriend, the friend still loves her (in fact, Emily at one point chastises her for not being honest). After temporarily losing her job for lying, Emily never once frets about money or the validity of her visa.

The world of Emily in Paris is a post-scarcity society where Americans don't need visas, and couture clown clothes are available on the French healthcare system. And also, like I said, she seems to have killed a man and completely gotten away with it. I eagerly anticipate the bodycount mounting. That often happens when Americans go abroad.

New releases Music



Christmas without the cliches



LAURA CANNELL, ANDRÉ BOSMAN
New Christmas Rituals ★★★★★
Brawl Records

Otherworldly. Nocturnal. Meditative. These are the abiding impressions created by this starkly beautiful collection from English fiddle player Laura Cannell and Kentucky fiddler André Bosman. The duo have performed together for some years now, and it shows in their intuitive, seamless playing.

New Christmas Rituals is as far

from the tired cliches and jaded stereotypes of the festive season as anyone can get, and still it manages to be steeped in a sense of, yes, ritual and reflection befitting the close of another year. Cannell's overbow fiddle paired with Bosman's amplified fiddle and bass guitar together conjure a sound world that is full of intrigue and strangeness, one that lures the listener ever deeper into its maw, where echoes of familiar festive melodies are interwoven with stark and sinuous elaborations on familiar themes.

Cannell may be known around these parts for her film composition work (under the name of Isobel Raven) and her gargantuan 2021 project where she released an album a month in collaboration with cellist Kate Ellis, titled *These Feral Lands*.

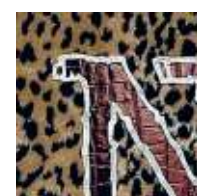
Her work with Bosman is of a different hue, fuelled by the pairing of two very different fiddle sounds. Hers occupies a wide open space, and mines the hypnotic potential of repetitive sequences, while Bosman's fiddle has a wilder, throaty and undeniably southern states sensibility, one that wraps itself around Cannell's playing with equal parts grace and danger.

Among the nine tracks are some familiar carols: *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen* and *Deck The Halls*, and a number of less well known choices (at least in these parts) such as *The Coventry Carol* and *The Shropshire Carol*. *Green Grows the Holly* is on the receiving end of a stunning arrangement, tiptoeing in and around its festive roots with the freedom of a child released from unwanted

fetters on a wide open plain. A highlight is Cannell's and Bosman's treatment of *O Come O Come Emmanuel*. At just over two minutes, what could have been a fleeting excerpt is an anchor that reaches in to its familiar melody line and then takes it somewhere else, where it floats free, another untethered ritual finding a new adventure. Which is what many of us seek at Christmas: nodding to the rituals and traditions of the past, while finding our own new ones.

This is music for night-time listening, with curtains drawn. Mysterious and magical, but never predictable, it's a collection that's likely to find its footing not only during each festive season, but for some months into each new year too.

SIOBHÁN LONG



NOFX
Double Album ★★
Fat Wreck Chords

There has always been a lot to admire about NOFX. Over the course of their almost 40-year-long career, the LA punks have remained steadfastly independent and obstinately uncompromising.

Occasionally their loutish indifference has been to their detriment, as with frontman Fat Mike's ill-advised joke about the 2017 Las Vegas concert shooting.

The band's 15th album – not a double album, despite its title – is as louche as ever. There is nothing musically captivating here, although drummer Erik Sandin's work on tracks such

as *My Favourite Enemy* and *F**k Day Six* – which comically recounts Mike's stint in rehab – is tremendous.

Elsewhere, the brisk tempo, terse basslines and sloganeering lyrics sound stuck in the past; even their one-time rivals Green Day have progressed.

The exceptions are two very different songs: *Is it Too Soon If Time is Relative?* is a puerile – and plain confusing – take-down of Stephen Hawking ("He may be smart/ But to me he's just a creepy narcoleptic mime"), while *Three Against Me*, an ultra-personal track about Mike's childhood abuse at the hands of his brothers, sounds like a musical therapy session.

The frontman is on record as saying that this is their "funniest" release, but that he "wouldn't pick it as one of our better albums". Regardless of your predisposition to NOFX, it's difficult to disagree with him.

LAUREN MURPHY



MOLLY O'MAHONY
The House of David ★★★★★
Self-released

West Cork's Molly O'Mahony has left her previous music outlet, art-folk group Mon-goose, to forge a solo identity.

Her debut album ably showcases this with a collection of songs that document years of a life fully lived, loved, lost and then, gradually, reclaimed.

After she had spent 10 years in Dublin, the advent of the pandemic prompted O'Mahony to return, insulated and isolated, to her home in Ballydeob, where she set about writing songs that would tell the story of her life through

her 20s – an emotional excursion, she says, that took her "from innocence to experience . . . through all the awkward, lovelorn shape-shifting I've undergone . . . a monument to love, lessons and growth."

The House of David – assisted by siblings Fiachra and Matilda, and produced by Alex Borwick – outlines the rise and fall of adventure and exploration and occasional vulnerable fallouts.

Her Song ("coffee and a scene around the Liberties . . . I'll bring my bike and swing round your place . . . buzz me in") is a breezy tale of budding and then established romance, while *Tomorrow's Lunch* ("boxing off tomorrow's lunch, I watched you so discreetly") is a whistle-friendly (literally) outline of even-tempered homemaking.

These and more showcase O'Mahony's delicate but determined creative mindset.

TONY CLAYTON-LEA



LÍ BÁN
Rud Nach Léir ★★★★★
Self-released

The ties that bind tradition and people are writ large across this album from singer and flute player Ríoghach Connolly and her family. This Armagh clan bring a rich tapestry of influences to this sprawling collection of over 70 minutes of music, much of it rarely heard outside of its own locale.

No fewer than four generations of singers are gathered here, including an old recording of Ríoghach's great-great-uncle Rosie Hurl (singing *Old Ardboe*) and her recently departed father, Tarlac Ua Conghlaigh. His warm, textured voice delivers a robust reading of *Séamus Mac Murfaidh*, bringing a powerful close to what is a wilfully diverse and open-hearted collection.

Aoibheann Devlin's wire-strung harp, a copy of the Downhill harp preserved in the Guinness Storehouse, imbues *Seabhac na hÉirne* by Ruairi Dall Ó Catháin with an aptly aged quality, and her fiddle playing on *Errigall Braes* adds further to the sense of a fireside session captured in full motion.

Unsurprisingly, Ríoghach's own flute playing wraps itself around some finely chosen tunes, and her vocal treatment of *Roddy McCorley* and *Cailín as Contae Lú* weave a delicate web through complex stories. They take their band name from the mermaid of Lough Neagh, while the album title doffs its cap to things not apparent – or unseen.

Thankfully Lí Bán are shedding a light on music and song too long confined – but now finally unleashed with verve.

SIOBHÁN LONG