

**The Cubists – Soft Train Sessions, Vol. 1**

When you think bassless duos or trios, current trends, specifically garage blues-rock, immediately spring to mind. And why shouldn't they? That's really the only use of the formula that has surfaced since the White Stripes expanded on a sound pioneered years earlier by Jon Spencer Blues Explosion. This is the norm, really: No second generation grunge band ever stepped outside of what Mudhoney or The Melvins framed while grunge was at its peak, so the genre wasn't ever sufficiently challenged.

With a lineup identical to The Soledad Brothers (two guitarists, one drummer) and a three-track EP barely capping 12 minutes, presupposing The Cubists' sound is a sin easily forgiven. Even the hurried opening one-two bass-snare beat of "Hatchetman" could mislead a listener down to the crossroads. There's simply just too much going on for that assumption to last, as the song is derailed at about a minute and a half in by the groovy swagger of the pseudo-chorus, then washed down with a spoonful of psychedelia. At about the three-minute mark, Barfield returns with a bent, screeching solo that escorts the song to a vexed exit.

The Cubists flex a little surf muscle on "Wishing Well," but it's more like the tattooed surfer punk style of The Mermen or Man or Astroman? than the clean-cut reverb-worshipping Ventures. It's on this track that drummer Chris Carrick's jazzy finesse finds its place in backing Barfield as he skates up the fretboard with Fripp-like ease. After Noel Brown's hipster-realist philosophy on the furtive "Future on the Dial" fades out, Barfield enters again with a final outro solo, this time a majestic, soaring one that ends too soon.

As the first of what has been planned to be several EPs in a bold undertaking, "Soft Train Sessions, Vol. 1" serves as a fine familiarization to what will likely be a constantly amorphous sound. So enjoy this, short as it may be, but don't get too used to it.

**The Shaun Piazza Band – The Shaun Piazza Band (Independently Released)**

To say that country-tinged rock has, in recent years, failed to distinguish itself would make me a master of understatement. The country-rock genre as a whole really exists on a line so jagged that country artists are often labeled as rock and vice-versa. Given the mass of grey area that exists, there still remains a reliable formula that has largely either been dumbed down and commercialized for the masses or, as in the unique case of Wilco, been driven to the border of inaccessibility to prove the genre's elasticity.

The driving force behind The Shaun Piazza Band's debut album seems to be disproving the theories that simplicity begets unoriginality and that no significant imprint can be made without a blind leap into the abyss. By using nearly the simplest of *modi operandi* – a basic but fitting drumbeat coupled with a steadily thumping bass line, an acoustic guitar, a violin and a voice – Piazza not only proves that you don't necessarily have to be vanguard in order to leave a lasting stamp on a listener's mind, but also uncoils the honest structure of each song, readying it for ease of digestion.

The album trots along seamlessly, leading to the imagining of an effortless recording session. Whether or not this was the case in reality, this feel carries right over to the listener, and the result is one of those records with cordial, faintly familiar melodies you swear you've heard before. Because there are so many shining qualities, it's useless to say that Piazza's from-the-gut belting

or Henry Wynn's excellent phrasing on violin carry any one song. Every instrument, every part of each song, melts together nicely; even the violin, previously only an accessory to rock music, finds an integral place on this album.

When a group starts life at this level, the possibilities are staggering. Beyond mere local appeal, this record has seemingly infinite replay value, and it survived a multitude of unfruitful searches for flaws. It is, quite frankly, perfect. Highly recommended.