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MUSIC

Damaged Goods

Fiddy: purveyor of musical porn and champion starer

50 CENT
Before I Self Destruct
(Aftermath)
★★

Ahead of the release of his fourth album, Curtis James Jackson III promised that it would be "darker and more aggressive" than its predecessor. Oh great. It's hard to think of anything that hip hop, or, indeed, the world, needs less than a darker, more aggressive 50 Cent.

It sounds like the most unwelcome development in his career since Blood On The Sand, his moronically violent shoot 'em up video game, released earlier this year.

Initially, Before I Self Destruct lives down to its maker's depressing claims. On the opening track, The Invitation, 50 boasts about having "more guns than a gun shop", threatens violence against anyone and everyone, and raps about setting up crack houses.

You'd have to be a 14-year-old fantasist to classify this as entertainment. It's not. The well-worn defence that it's a just reflection of real life on the street is just so much blah. This is a form of musical porn.

Then Dr Dre enters stage left to confuse the issue. He produces four out of the 16 tracks, and musically at least, they are hip hop gold. Death To My Enemies is built around a twangy guitar riff that echoes Dre's masterpiece, The Chronic, while OK, You're Right combines a stop-start beat with orchestral stabs and eerie female vocals in a rap opus. Just try not nodding your head.

As one of hip hop's biggest names, 50 has his top beatsmith on speed dial, and however inexcusable the imagery, there's no denying there are some compelling moments here. Whether it's worth tuning out the guns, bitches and casual violence is another matter.

Chris Cottingham

ALBUMS

CODEINE VELVET CLUB
Codeine Velvet Club
(Island)
★★★
In which John Lawler, lead singer with The Fratellis, teams up with singer-songwriter Lou Hickey to record an album of '60s orchestral pop. The result is not unlike The Last Shadow Puppets. Decent enough, but isn't this the rock version of Robbie Williams' big band album, Swing When You're Winning?

ERIK HASSLE
Pieces
(Company Ten/Island)
★★★★
Already a big deal in his native Sweden, 21-year-old Erik Hassle has yet to make an impression in the UK. That seems likely to change with his debut, which is packed full of melancholy pop gems.

STEREOPHONICS
Keep Calm And Carry On
(Mercury)
★★★
Stereophonics (lead singer Kelly Jones, right) are the very definition of meat 'n' potatoes rock. And they've done very well out of it – their last five albums have gone to Number 1. They stick to the lad-rock formula here, only going off-road with the electronic beats of Beerbottle. No surprises, then. Which is evidently the way their fans like it.

SINGLES

JASON DERÜLO
Whatcha Say
(Warners/Beluga Heights)
★★
Jason Derülo's debut single has already topped the American charts, selling 750,000 copies in the process. It's not clear why. There's nothing special about the R&B beats, Derülo's auto-tuned vocals or the sample from Imogen Heap's song Hide And Seek. He sounds like a cut-price Akon.

ELLIE GOULDING
Under The Sheets
(Neon Gold)
★★★
Ellie Goulding is a little bit different. The 22-year-old singer's debut single is pitched somewhere between the electro pop of La Roux and Laura Marling's folkiness – electro-folk, perhaps. Her warbling voice, meanwhile, is all her own. She's sure to feature in the ones to watch for 2010 lists.

GROOVE ARMADA
I Won't Kneel
(Cooking Vinyl)
★★★
On a recent Australian tour, Groove Armada's Tom Findlay said that his band's "darker side... was finally coming out after 12 years", hence the title of their forthcoming eighth album, Black Light, released next year. You couldn't describe the lead single as particularly dark, although the moody synths, '80s guitar riffs and singer Saint Saviour's strident vocals are certainly poppier than anything they've done in the past.

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SUMMER EVENTS

THE SPECIALS

When The Specials got back together at the beginning of this year, frontman Terry Hall told one interviewer: "I know how precious this band is to a lot of people."

But even he must have been surprised at quite how precious. The first round of dates on their reunion tour sold 45,000 tickets in an hour. Which is why the ska icons have added a second leg (billed as the "final dates" on their website).

The triumphant return might have something to do with the times. The Specials captured the bleakness of late '70s and early '80s Britain on songs such as Ghost Town and Gangsters. Fast forward 30 years and the same issues – recession, unemployment and racism – are back in the headlines, and The Specials find themselves chiming with the times once again.

Crucially, they remain an electrifying live band, which elevates the whole enterprise above your bog-standard nostalgia trip.

The band's 19-date tour continues this week and concludes with a three-night stand at the Hammersmith Apollo in London at the end of the month. *www.thespecials.com*

"The first dates on their tour sold 45,000 tickets in an hour"

The Specials: timely

GIGS

BEYONCÉ
Following last year's I Am... Sasha Fierce album, Beyoncé's world tour, which started back in April, has arrived in the UK. The 28-year-old diva comes fresh from winning three gongs at the European Music Awards. Her eight-date tour continues this week. *www.beyonceonline.com*

SLAYER
Slayer's 11th album, World Painted Blood, was released earlier this month. Twenty-eight years into their career, they still rock harder than bands half their age. The metal legends' seven-date UK tour starts in Nottingham this Wednesday. *www.slayer.net*

LILY ALLEN
Is she quitting the music business, or not? There may be no sign of a new record contract, but still, this week the answer would appear to be: not. Lily Allen's (right) 15-date tour starts this Monday in Sheffield. *www.lilyallenmusic.com*

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To be in with a chance of winning simply answer the following question:

Q. What is the name of John Mayer's new album?

A Battle Studies
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