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# ON THE RACK

by Lissa Townsend Rodgers and Shanna Howard

The



**Living End**

"The Living End"

(Reprise)

They'll be arguing over the best record of 1999 well into the next millennium, but if we're handing out awards for the most **fun** record of the year, the Living End may as well clear a space on the mantelpiece right now. A trio from Australia (so, no, the accents aren't faked like Green Day's), the Living End kick ass and top charts with a rockabilly-punk-pop sound that'll make any senior citizen feel like a snot-nosed kid again. Their full-length debut, "The Living End," takes off like a shot from the first track, "Prisoner of Society," which puts driving standup bass and revved-up guitars behind chants of "We don't need no one like you/To tell us what to do!" The whole album is full-throttle, from the alternately galloping and cascading guitars of "Growing Up (Falling Down)," to the slick, Duane Eddy-ish instrumental "Closing In." What sets the Living End apart from the rest of their high-speed, pop-punk brethren is that these guys can actually *play*—they clearly mastered the flourishes before stripping down to the basics.

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Other standout tracks are "Bloody Mary," which goes lower, slower, and sleazier than the rest of the batch, with a pulp-noir feel and a hypnotic swing behind the chorus. "Strange" is an anthem of "I don't know what makes me different/And I don't care," propelled by a tight rhythm section, with a lounge-y break in the middle that's anachronistic but a tailor-made fit.

An odd thing about "The Living End" is the lack of a single song about girls or cars; it's an upbeat, rocking album about prisoners of war, capital punishment, class warfare, and the preservation of historic buildings. For example: The stomping, ska-tinged "Monday" is about that guy who gunned down a dozen elementary school kids in Scotland a few years back—not that I'd have figured that out without the Cliffs Notes. They ain't Bob Dylan (though they were probably aiming more for Joe Strummer), none of the sentiments are profound, and sometimes it's hard to figure out just what they're alluding to—but if you're going to holler about something, you may as well holler about politics. After all, the instruments alone tell us that the Living End are smarter than they look.—*Lissa Townsend Rodgers*

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## The Roots

### "Things Fall Apart"

(MCA Records)

The Roots' fourth album, "Things Fall Apart," is nearly flawless. And it should be—they spent two years writing almost 150 songs before deciding on the 17 that make up the album. The Philadelphia-based group is a hip hop *band*—hip hop artists who jam with live instruments. It seems as though this is something they struggle with, trying to stay true to their musical integrity in a genre filled with emcees rapping about making money—a point they address on "Ain't Saying Nothin' New."

For this album, the Roots spent time trying to figure out how to manipulate instruments to sound like samples, giving the album a grittier feel, and their human beatbox, Rahzel, is getting better at expertly mimicking a scratch. "The Spark" features D'Angelo on bass, Fatin Dantzler singing a Marvin Gaye track in the background—but manipulated to sound like an instrument—and Kamal playing an effect-altered, flea-market guitar. The Roots play



around with other tricks on this album: Backwards keyboards, backwards singing, and using empty water-cooler bottles for percussion, among other things.

The long-missing Jazzy Jeff contributes cutting and scratching on "The Next Movement," along with samples from the World Famous Supreme Team's "Buffalo Gals." The track "Dynamite" is one of the finest on the disc (produced by Jay Dee, who's also done albums for the Pharcyde, De La Soul, and Busta Rhymes), with Black Thought's vocal staccato accented by a simple, addictive guitar loop. "Act Too (The Love of My Life)" is the Roots' reflection on the evolution of hip hop and how it's ruled their lives, a multi-layered masterpiece that starts out with Marie Daulne's simple but stunning background vocals and ends with a guest rap by Common. "100% Dundee" is a hard-hitting, high-energy tune, with aggressive vocals with Rahzel providing the heavy bass and drums. You've probably already heard the lush and solemn, drum 'n' bass-inspired "You Got Me," which features Erykah Badu (whose "Baduism" was produced by the Roots). Poetess Ursula Rucker provides the chilling spoken word for the last track of the album, "Return to Innocence Lost."

The Roots call themselves perfectionists, and they've produced a cohesive and innovative album that, although falling within the confines of hip hop, transcends the genre. On "Things Fall Apart," it's evident that everything seems to be coming together for the Roots.—*Shanna Howard*

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## Man...Or Astroman?

### "Eeviac: Operational Index and Reference Guide Including Other Modern Computational Devices"

(*Touch and Go*)

Well, for those of you who aren't hip to the shtick, Man Or Astro-Man? are a science fiction-themed surf-guitar outfit: Blend the Ventures with a dab of Pavement, run through about 150 episodes of "Mystery Science Theater 2000" and *voilà*—Man Or Astro-Man? It's a concept that invites routine execution, but "Eeviac" is the Astro-Men's most varied effort to date. It opens with the trademark sci-fi dialogue snippet ("It's the same sound over and over!"), rapid-fire pipeline riffs, and cymbal flourishes of "Interstellar Hardrive"—but then they boldly go where they haven't gone before with the following track, "D:Contamination," which is almost *funky*, for God's sake, beatboxing and analog-sounding samples laying a groove behind chopped-up guitars. (If these guys ever harness the power of the breakbeat, we'll never be able to stop them!)



"Psychology of A.I. (Numbers Follow Answers)" is a fabulously fucked-up punk rock tune that clocks in at 1:29 and sounds like a third-generation 99-cent tape playing too loud through waterlogged speakers. But, *damn*, it's catchy. "Krasnoyask-26" is more aural collage than song, cutting up computer-paranoia dialogue excerpts with a mix of

UFO landing blips, bleeps, and whirrs over tape loops. The closer, "\_\_\_/myopia," veers into art-rock jam territory, lots of synths and crescendos, and guitars that sound more like Flying V's than Telecasters drifting into abruptly-terminated infinity.

Still, for fans there's lots of tracks that max out the possibilities of tube amps and whammy bars and clipped, whitebread voices muttering about "A situation where every single atom, every molecule here is duplicated here—except it's in reverse!" The credits aren't on the sleeve, but the "automated liner notes sequence" at the end of the disc provides the pertinent information in suitable space-age fashion. Very Astro-Man indeed.—*Lissa Townsend Rodgers*

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