

GUIDE TO RICHARD YOUNGS

RICHARD YOUNGS ON JAGJAGUWAR

Youngs' recorded output on the Indiana-based label Jagjaguwar represents his most accessible chunks of work, while still sounding little like anything else out there. Additionally, these titles are the easiest to find, and a couple of them can usually be found in most good independent record stores.

- ***The Naive Shaman***: Possibly the most straightforward statement of intent from this part of Youngs' body of work. *The River Through Howling Sky*, *Airs of the Ear*, and *Naive Shaman* are the three works on Jagjaguwar which are largely multi-instrumental affairs dealing in simple phrases, and short vocal progressions, developed through loose repetition. *Naive Shaman* consists of bass loops, synthesizer smears, snare & cymbal drumming, and a great melancholy, Robert Wyatt-esque vocal compliment. An excellent place to start.
- ***Sapphie***: This album consists of three longform pieces for nylon-string guitar and vocal, in Youngs' classic plaintive style. Apparently a song cycle mourning the death of a beloved dog, this is another of the album in which Youngs' abilities on the guitar become apparent. His playing is wonderfully measured and controlled. A lovely album on the surface bears rewards with repeated listens; subtly shifting patterns emerge in the guitar playing as one becomes more familiar with the pieces.
- ***Beyond The Valley of Ultrahits***: Richard Youngs' song-based synth-pop album was originally released on Andrew Paine's Sonic Oyster Records in a very small CDR edition. Many found it absurd that such a finely wrought piece of work would languish in quick obscurity, and it was re-issued on LP by Jagjaguwar. The album is a set of sharply-written, catchy-as-hell melodies, vaguely recalling elements of Kate Bush and Pet Shop Boys, but shot through with that peculiar, folky melodic sense found running through all of Youngs' vocal-based work. Instrumentation includes bass, electric guitar (complete with a few ripping solos), keyboards, and drums, whose rather wide approach to pulse sounds like a drum machine, played by hand. And of course the voice; Youngs' vocal leads and background seem to snake around each other at all times, blurring which of the voices is 'leading'.

RICHARD YOUNGS ON NO FANS

The **No Fans** record label that Youngs has operated sporadically since the '80s, is responsible for the most bizarre corners of his catalogue. This work will be discussed here, but it should be noted that there a handful of other similar albums released by labels such as Chocolate Monk, Fusetron, and Table of the Elements. One in particular that should be sought out is ***House Music***, an album created using only sounds from his father's house in Harpenden. Hard to find a real copy, try a download.

- The first **No Fans** release, ***Advent***, consisted of three tracks based around a simple, slightly off-kilter piano phrase, over which he soloed on guitar, oboe, and voice. The album has since become considered a classic, listed in the second edition of Alan Licht's *Minimalist Top Ten- The Next Ten*

(http://rateyourmusic.com/list/funks/alan_lichts_minimal_top_ten_and_the_next_ten_and_minimalism_top_ten_iii), and has been reissued on Jagjaguwar.

- Other memorable titles in the **No Fans** catalogue include the *New Angloid Sound* LP (a co-release with Forced Exposure, two sides of Youngs ripping on kazoo and classical guitar), the *Multi-Tracked Shakuhachi* CDR, and the supremely odd *Live In Salford* CDR, which features a set of chanted vocals, followed by a wild solo on the ‘magic flute’. One other album to mention from this area, originally issued on CDR, since reissued on LP by Gypsy Sphinx, is the *Summer Wanderer* album. Three long-form a capella pieces, a sort of update on tradition British folk tunes, beautifully sung by Youngs. One of the more disarming points in his discography.

Many of these albums existed for short periods of time, in very small editions, in a variety of formats, often with exclusive distribution. That is to say, they are mostly impossible to find, save for the odd copy or two turning up on the internet. Get them however you can.

RICHARD YOUNGS & ALEX NEILSON

For the better part of the 00s, this was the most visible of Youngs’ duos. The two created a nice stack of albums, mostly available easily from the VHF label, which has an efficient mailorder, and otherwise good distribution. Alex Neilson is a drummer located in Glasgow, who in the last few years has gained much attention for his work at the kit (for such acts as Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy, Alasdair Roberts, Baby Dee, Current 93, etc), as a songwriter and singer (for his excellent group Trembling Bells, and also the odd a capella performance), and as a collaborator (Directing Hand with Lavinia Blackwell, Motor Ghost with Ben Reynolds, Taurpis Tula and Tight Meat Duo with David Keenan, etc).

- **Partick Rain Dance:** The most psychedelic, and playfully experimental-sounding of the duo’s releases. This album was also one of many that seemed to pour forth in a short amount of time (2004-6 produced five classic titles). The album is all about layering of clatter-y, small percussion, individual drums (not drumset), bowed things, feedback, vocals, and oscillator-style electronics (could be keyboards, treated guitars, who knows). There are a few moments of more structured, quite lovely melodic, instrumental playing, but often the layering, and the unfolding of how the layers interact, is what defines this album.
- **Electric Lotus/Lotus Edition:** Their most recent release for VHF records was this LP/CD set. The LP portion of release, *Electric Lotus*, consists of Neilson’s signature free-jazz/rock drumming and Youngs’ overlaid electric guitars and bass. They settle into the occasional skewed groove here and there, vaguely Beefheartian albeit woollier and more unhinged, but spend ample amounts of time skirting around their basic frameworks. The CD half, *Lotus Edition*, is an extended duo performance, with Neilson again at the kit, but this time Youngs is on shakuhachi. The set recalls the classic sax & drum duos of the free jazz canon (*Interstellar Space*, *Duo Exchange*, *The Beloved Music*, etc), which seems unlikely given the presence of a shakuhachi and Neilson’s all-out bombast, but somehow the mix achieves a great balance.
- **Beating Stars:** One of the earlier recordings from the duo. This album shares some of the same textures as *Partick Rain Dance*, but there is a much more insistent use of repetition, and the

'songs' are much more straightforward. Their use of the song 'Rolling in the Dew' also betrays a mutual interest in traditional folk forms of Britain and Scotland.

- **Jandek:** One other important collaboration these two have shared is as band members for Jandek, the reclusive, mysterious, crazily prolific artist from Texas. When Jandek suddenly began performing live in 2004, the band was comprised of Sterling Smith on guitar and vocals, Richard Youngs on electric bass, and Alex Neilson at the kit. Jandek has since taken on many forms, with an impressive list of international rhythm sections (among them Chris Corsano, Matt Heyner, Loren Mazzacane Connors, Alan Licht, Rachael Wadham, Dave Chokroun, Nick Fraser, David Keenan, Heather Leigh Murray, et al), but the Youngs/Neilson (occasionally swapping out for bowed upright bass and bell percussion, respectively) grouping has proven to be one of the more satisfying units, and all of their performances have been documented on CD (and a few on DVD) on the Corwood Industries record label. *Glasgow Sunday* and *Camber Sands Sunday* are two recommended starting points for the work of this particular trio.

RICHARD YOUNGS & SIMON WICKHAM-SMITH

The earliest of Youngs' duos, this duo has also expressed the widest range of activity, from stark minimalist jams to concept records and song-based sets. The intensity of their output appeared to slow in the early 00s, which is also when the other duos became active. A lot of this material has been released on VHF. For the older, out of print LPs, they do turn up on the internet.

- **Lake:** The duo's early epic, a double-LP concept record about the lake, in all its forms, covering a ridiculous amount of ground. Skit-like spoken sections sit next to stark machine-clanging, and fragments of songs, and backwards tapes with percussion overlaid. *Lake* gained the duo their notoriety in the early '90s, impressing the likes of Forced Exposure, an influential mailorder/zine at the time, and brought them some recognition in the US. It came out originally as a **No Fans** release, but has since been reissued by VHF.
- **20 Years:** VHF released this sumptuous package for the 20th anniversary of activity for this duo. The set contains three unreleased albums on CD (including a shelved song-based album, containing writing and singing by both R and S), an LP of older recordings, re-imagined through the use of the computer, and extensive liners. Not the ideal place to start, necessarily, but it's cheap and totally crazy.
- **Knish:** The material on *Knish* is typical of a strand of releases from the '90s. Very simple elements explored thoroughly and patiently. Other albums saw the two on violins, sampling keyboards, etc, but this one benefited from the presence of a piano in the studios at the WKCR radio station in New York. Wickham-Smith takes the keys and Youngs plays electric guitar. They work away insistently at simple rhythmic cells and chord progressions; the result is quietly psychedelic. Neat scotch-taped-on album art, too.

ILK

Ilk is the manifestation of Richard Youngs' and Andrew Paine's deep love of progressive rock, at its most florid and overdone. Youngs frequently expresses profound admiration for the Pink Floyd, Peter Hammill (of Van der Graaf Generator), and Yes, but one would be wrong to think that his tribute would

be pure pastiche. As with his version of pop music on *Beyond The Valley of Ultrahits*, Youngs refashions the genre with his own particular stamp. Ilk is also the place where you can hear that Youngs is actually a real motherfucker on the guitar. The first release from the duo, *Zenith*, released in 1998 on No Fans, features odd instrumentation playing crazy classically-inflected psychedelic progressive folk-rock. Featuring spoken word bits, epic solos and arrangements, and some raw, inspired playing, it's every bit as ponderous as it aims to be. The second record, *Canticle*, this time released on VHF, is much more succinct, and considerably rawer. The wild overdubbed drums & cymbals, the fuzzy leads, and rubbery bass playing, and less self-consciously strange vocal parts make it a strong step forward. There have since been two releases on Paine's Sonic Oyster Records, both of which are excellent, although much less tied to the overarching Ilk themes; much looser, more improvisatory outings.

RICHARD YOUNGS & ANDREW PAINE

Youngs' most recent and by far the most prolific to date, is the Paine-Youngs duo, which appears as separate from the Ilk recordings. The *Mauve Dawn* LP (on Fusetron) was the first issue from this group, but quickly their output moved to a seemingly neverending stream of CDRs for Paine's own Sonic Oyster Records, based in Glasgow. The volume of recordings is in part due to the weekly sessions from which these albums are culled, and the largely improvised nature of most of them. That said, this is not like any other type of improvised music. The instrumentation often centres around electric bass, electric guitars, smaller percussion, vocals, shakuhachi, and a healthy dose of synths and FX. There are well over 20 albums released in the last four years, and unfortunately much of it is out of print. The *Mauve Dawn* LP and the first two Ilk albums are still relatively easy to find, and give some indication of the scope of the duo's activities. Those interested in following the new releases should get on the Sonic Oyster mailing list, or check out Volcanic Tongue.

(Chris Dadge, 2010)