



RAFTER

Rafter is a one-man army of excellence, recording high-minded, lo-fi pop in the tradition of whatever's good. Witness his latest nineteen-song, thirty-five-minute opus, which touches upon the rhythmic stomp of Elvis Costello, the eerie gentleness of John Lennon, the quirky madness of Stephen Malkmus, and Unicorn's shambling pop. *Sex Death Cassette* is a warm, fuzzy rebuke to our age of overcompressed studio bullshit. "It was tracked on four-track with some computer assists for editing and minor overdubs," Rafter Roberts says. As for the songs themselves, he's all modesty: "It's like an excavation/spontaneous combustion thing. I'm just digging them up more than crafting them over time."

Enlisting the help of several musicians, including Rocket From the Crypt's Jason Crane on trumpet, *Sex Death Cassette* plays like a well-thought mix tape, infused with a slightly noir tinge that lends the proceedings distinctive flavor and style. He's been playing out as a two-piece, with girlfriend Lizeth assisting on drums, samples and melodicas. "Prior to that it was a twelve-piece with horn section, backup singers, vibes...I'm working on the next incarnation as a six-piece with loads of percussion and a super-mashed-together dancing music feeling." DAVID BERKOVITS

Sex Death Cassette is out January 22 on *Asthmatic Kitty*.



CHEAP BEAT

For a moment, the Stockholm music scene threatened to become irredeemably passé. Swedish pop and the "Stockholm sound" had given us a mob of soundalike indie-pop groups—the Shout Out Louds, Peter Bjorn and John, I'm from Barcelona—that were all obsessed with the same twee tricks. Luckily, just when we were resigning ourselves to boredom, Cheap Beat made their triumphant arrival.

The young quartet introduced themselves to the Stockholm music scene through an ongoing party that eventually became known as Club Cheap Beat. The group fostered a sizable, loyal fan base from the short-lived club series and eventually released an EP, *Club Cheap Beat*, to commemorate the shows; it's a four-song reminder of how great the Swedish music scene was—and still can—be. Vocals recall The Cure's Robert Smith, while the arrangements mix Aztec Camera and Orange Juice with the summery harmonies of The Beach Boys and the jangly post-punk raunchiness of Echo & the Bunnymen. If you need to categorize Cheap Beat, just call them The Undertones of the twenty-first century.

Instead of a standard biography, the four-piece sent us a band-generated Sean Connery "James Bond" endorsement of themselves ("Hello. My name is James Bond. I would like to present to you Cheap Beat...They say they are all in great shape. Thank you."), a cut-and-pasted MSN Messenger bicker over whether writing a biography was worth their time, and the lads' press photo, which appears to have been shot during a slumber party pillow fight.

The guys act half their age and are completely convinced that they're the best thing to happen to pop music in recent history, and who are we to disagree? Cheap Beat is reawakening us to the truth of great pop music and the power of anthemic songs that unify rather than alienate. It's refreshingly honest music in an age of overbearingly segregated genres and the aloof pretension of the Pitchfork generation. Cheap Beat isn't out to save the world, but if you listen closely, they might just redeem Sweden. NIK MERCER

TOBE WELANDER: IMAGE