

Reviews by Michael Grinter



The events leading up to the death of Diana in *Diana – Last Days of a Princess*, on Tuesday, 31 August 2010 at 7.25pm and 8.10pm. exclusively on BBC Knowledge (now TV Channel 220 / Hong Kong Cable TV Channel 49) on the anniversary of her death.

It is August 1997 and Princess Diana is once more dominating the headlines. Embracing romance after a blindingly public divorce and basking in luxury, her jet set lifestyle is the stuff of fantasy.

Diana is driven by the desire to fulfil private hopes and ambitions amid the constant glare of publicity. From the palm trees of Saint Tropez to the sparkling streets of Paris, rushed decisions made in the heat of the moment are revealed, and their fateful significance exposed, as the lovers enter their final month, their final week and their final day. As Diana seeks an elusive sense of freedom, and the photographers chase the promise of instant riches, discover just how events in Paris on the night of August 31, 1997, fatally spiral out of control.

Diana – Last Days of a Princess fulfils an audience's need to know more about an event that shocked the world. Since that day a thousand headlines have blurred the truth. This two part drama-doc brings clarity and closure.

MUSIC

SYMPHONICITIES

Sting (Deutsche Grammophon)



AS A CHILD it was my misfortune to be subjected to a parent's passion for the sickly sweet strings of the Mancini Orchestra. Mancini's work is the aural equivalent of those ghastly portraits of kids, all blonde curls and teardrops, sold at Woolworths in the 1970s.

These tortured memories came flooding back the moment Sting's *Symphonicities* slid into the CD player. The staff of HMV, spun into a whirl of confusion by the sight of the Deutsche Grammophon label, foolishly display this album in the classical section. Classical it aint. Classic it is definitely not.

Englishman in New York, a half-baked jazz effort on the first attempt, loses any remaining dignity it might have had when violin pizzicato is added.

Roxanne at least had grit when it was a sing-along crowd pleaser at Police concerts. Smother it in strings and mournful clarinets then sing like a gigolo and we are in *Lady in Red* territory, not the saving of a desperate streetwalker.

Don't get me started on *We Work the Black Seam*. To simply take the brass section from the orchestra and try to make it sound like the Grimethorpe Colliery Band just doesn't cut it.

Unlike millions of others, I have always had time for Sting, even if only a few moments. But *Symphonicities* is just lazy and cynical. Fans of Susan Boyle will love it.

I SPEAK BECAUSE I CAN

Laura Marling (Virgin)

Who would have thought we would see so much folk music raising its head again, albeit in new forms? Last seen with the likes of the Pogues in the 1980s, there is a definite resurgence with bands like Fleet Foxes, Noah and the Whale, and the Monsters of Folk claiming their places in the charts.

Laura Marling is something of a purist of the genre: only the opening track, Devil's Spoke, hints at psychedelic folk – and that just for a moment. But despite the restrictions of acoustic guitar, banjo and violins Marling aptly squeezes out surprises both musically and in her choice of dark lyrics.

This isn't necessarily English folk as we know it. What she wrote has Appalachian undertones that add to the overall darkness. Is there Sicilian blood on Alpha Shallows? Probably.

But while there is invention to add a dimension to those folksy sentiments of loss, pride, desire and estrangement, it's hard to find a compelling riff to hang onto: the kind that would take you back to the album on a regular basis.

Perhaps the best thing Marling has done for nu-folk so far was to break up with Charlie Fink of Noah and the Whale. The album, *The First Days of Spring*, wrought out of his misery over the break up, and released earlier this year, is a superior offering.



FURTHER

The Chemical Brothers (Parlophone)



One tends to equate big beat electronic dance with music that is new and slightly anonymous, after all the names aren't that important when you are under the spell. So it came as a surprise to discover that *Further* is the Chemical Brothers' seventh album.

Another reason for not clocking the band's 15-year history is that nothing has changed that much. Don't get me wrong; I'm a firm adherent of the "If it aint broke don't fix it" school of music, and there is much to admire on *Further*.

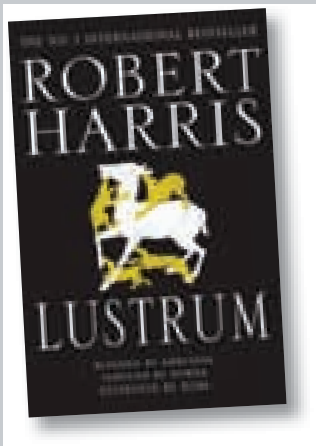
With the right piece of equipment, you too could be at one of their eardrum-blasting live sets. *Horse Power* and *Escape Velocity* sees the duo back at their best since the mid-90s, trembling the walls and raising the tension before releasing it with an injection of the highest octane energy.

Finally, what lifts it to the standard of some of their earlier work is the incredibly high-tech production – music you can feel physically as well as emotionally.

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LUSTRUM by Robert Harris

Arrow Books



One meaning of the Latin word *Lustrum* is a period of five years. Others include the den of a wild beast, or debauchery. As a title for Harris's take on the political in-fighting of the Roman Empire between 63BC and 58BC, it couldn't be bettered: every definition has its place where sex and violence pay tribute to power.

From the discovery of the mutilated corpse of a child, it's clear this death will be the first of many, as wealthy Crassus, militant Pompey, psychopathic Catilina, playboy Clodius, Cicero and Caesar jostle for position. Only the ultimate death – that of a way of life – falls outside the pages of this tale.

In writing a thriller based on fact and historical figures, or even the Roman god Janus, Harris is looking to the past while also casting an eye firmly on the present. Who doubts our own politicians are just as sleazy, just as likely to form convenient alliances and commit abject betrayals?

But as these larger-than-life classical characters struggle for their very lives, fighting for or against the survival of one of the world's first democracies, it is difficult to deny their dignity. A dignity unfortunately lacking today.

FAMILY BRITAIN 1951-57 by David Kynaston

Bloomsbury

So complete is Kynaston's depiction of Britain between 1951 and 1957 that most readers will be able to come away with a reinforcement of their own prejudiced beliefs of the period: the racism West Indians confronted when they first sailed to these shores in numbers in 1956; a class-consciousness that meant the majority of the population did not exist – at least as far as the BBC was concerned.

Some will see only a period of decline, loss of empire and the humiliation of the country summed up by the Suez debacle in 1956, or they could be shocked by a country of housewives content with their lot.

Others will be nostalgic for the simpler, more innocent preoccupations of our parents and grandparents, who happily huddled around the radio in time for the Archers or the Goons. Who, incidentally smooched and snogged in their millions in dancehalls up and down the country when the basics of sex were learned from graphic depictions on public toilet walls.

Footballers who played for the glory rather than the money, the scandalous affair of Princess Margaret and Group Captain Townsend, allotments, the Women's Institute, the looming threat of nuclear war and the ration book. All life is here.



THE QUICKENING MAZE by Adam Foulds

Vintage



Like Robert Harris for *Lustrum* (see above), Adam Foulds' *The Quickening Maze* was shortlisted for the inaugural Walter Scott Historical Novel prize worth a cool £25,000. In the end, Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* pipped them both to the post. But like *Lustrum*, *The Quickening Maze* was a worthy contender. An extraordinary examination of poetry madness and identity, Foulds gives us an imaginary take on a real meeting between three unlikely Victorian figures, the Poet Lauriat Alfred Lord Tennyson, the nature poet John Clare and the pioneering mental health worker Matthew Allen.

Set in 1840 at the High Beach Private Asylum in Epping Forest just outside London, Clare is already an inmate when Tennyson arrives with his melancholic brother.

With a lightness of touch and sleight of hand, Foulds gives us a story about identity and the nature of selfhood, revealed through Matthew Allen and his family, through the inmates of the asylum, through two great but very different writers and through the Gypsies who live close by.

The acuteness of Foulds's writing combined with his obvious sympathy for the characters overcomes any disconnect between the real figures and his creations, and makes his prose poetic and true.

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