

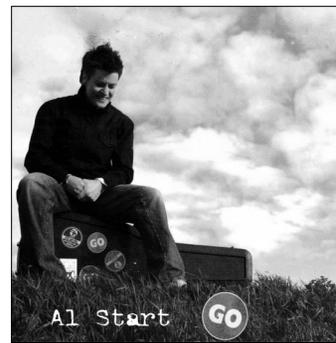
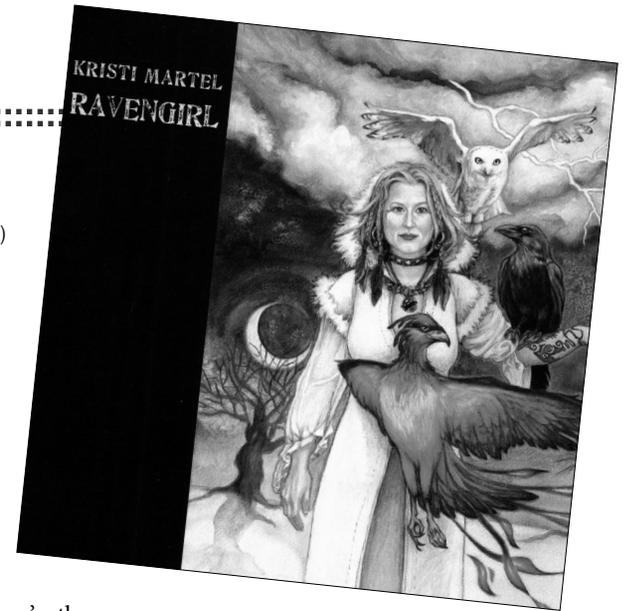
out on cd

by Brian Jewell

Ravengirl

Kristi Martel (Sealed Lip Records)

In this arresting, intense and surprisingly uplifting album, Martel works out some of her feelings about her lover's suicide. In the kaleidoscope of emotions, bewilderment is constant. In one song, her voice somewhere between chortle and wail, she says "I asked to see a counselor but she said I was too *healthy*." Am I crazy, or is the world crazy, she seems to ask. The answer, of course, doesn't really matter. If you're the only sane one, what is there for you to do but go along with the world and go crazy? You can't get off the rollercoaster so you might as well try to enjoy the ride. It's that raw awareness, bemused and hurt but grateful and joyous, that makes *Ravengirl* so compelling. The album begins with the eerie instrumental "Oya," a sort of rite of passage easing us into Martel's psyche. Martel then wraps us in the gentle "Day of Rain," a song about the day you realize the crying is finally over and are able to look back, calm and clear-eyed. The collage of memories that follows is tinted with the full spectrum of emotion, and Martel's nimble voice constantly shifts with the music. Her voice is soft but assured on the wistful "Autumn Nightwork," delicate and little-girl-lost on "For Josh," and dramatic and powerful on the wrenching "Dear Emily." Martel favors elegant piano arrangements, but she also has a knack for adding just the right amount of extra instrumentation, like the layered choruses of "Give" and the sprightly percussion of "Crossing into Dreams." "I am doing fine, I am doing fine," she bubbles; it's not some ironic mantra or attempt at manifesting, just a cheerful chorus of simple truth. She's doing fine indeed, and the album soars way above fine.



Go

Al Start (Lone Coyote Records)

Clichés about navel-gazing singer-songwriters — especially of the lesbian with a guitar variety — came to be clichés because of their element of truth. Trust me, I've got the stack of CDs documenting codependent relationships with ex-girlfriends to prove it. Enter U.K. musician Al Start, cheerfully and efficiently setting things right and bringing some balance, like a Mary Poppins of the Lilith Fair. Not that there's a spoonful of sugar here, or that Start is afraid to get personal; but she's as multifaceted as she is honest and unaffected, turning her observant gaze on a variety of themes and moods. The album starts with the catchy "Rent," a slow rocking attack on hypocrisy, then switches gears into the dreamy "Tongue Tied," a soaring distillation of that scary-exciting feeling of having a crush. Start's crisp guitar and strong, clear voice prove lovely vehicles for a range of emotions and song-pictures, from the bittersweet "Black Crow" to the bouncy po-mo honkytonk of "Take it Back." My favorite track was "Stickleback," a whimsical evocation of childhood summers and the irresistible pulse of curiosity. "We never could resist a fence," she croons, and you can hear the smile. *Go* is full of that wry storytelling style, and its comfortable, mellow melodies are as enjoyable as they are wise.



Twist Party!

Los Straitjackets (Yep Roc Records)

I have to admit, I was initially disappointed in this disc. I like Los Straitjackets most when they rock out. But the muscular surf rock guitars and hypnotically snaky rhythms are muted here, in favor of pleasant retro-rock that can charm but can't quite wow. It does, however, grow on you. *Twist Party!* is a fun and slightly goofy tour of early rock-and-roll, complete with song titles like "Daddy-O" and "Prelude to a Twist." The band has captured the era's essence with admirable musicianship and respect. There's no tongue in cheek here, just infectious affection for the youthful innocence of sock hops and twist parties. Standout tracks include the exuberant "Kitty Kat," the piano driven "Twistin' in Outer Space," and the unrestrained and slightly otherworldly "The Mad Scientist." Bonus: *Twist Party!* comes with a DVD to help throw your own twist party. The disc has music videos, and dance instruction from The World Famous Pontani Sisters. Soon you'll be ready to bop down to the rec room, turn up the hi-fi, and do the Mad Scientist while sipping Cherry Coke.