

Album reviews

Madonna

MDNA

★★★★★

Judging precisely the point at which the curve of edgy innovation tips before rolling full force into the mainstream is a real skill. Being too far ahead of the curve can be as commercially disastrous as being behind it, but whether it's her choice of producers or use of sonic tropes, no one can deny Madonna's talent for timing. Superficial it may be, but that vowel-free title is very on-trend, even if (because?) it confuses Madge's name with an illegal substance.

The 'sell' for her 12th studio LP is that it's a mix of *Confessions on a Dancefloor* and *Ray of Light*, but in truth, it's much more like *Hard Candy* part II – and thus rather more disappointing. There's none of the groovy nu-disco of *Confessions...* and little of the melodic house of *Ray of Light*. Rather, it's a steamroller-subtle ride through the vogueish heartlands of super-glossy electro, R&B-pop, house, hip hop, industrial-funk, dubstep and, erm, Celtic folk.

More than anything, *MDNA* is an example of the Gaga/Jay-Z Effect writ large. The monstrous, hybrid sounds of these artists have built up an almost gladiatorial force, creating

expectations of modern pop that nobody in the chart-conquering biz can afford to deny. Which is why it's characterised by brutal, jackhammer beats, deep space and distorted effects with high-sheen production – effective, but not very individual.

That said, there are thrills aplenty in 'Gang Bang', which suggests *Sin City* come to life via menacing lyrics, squealing tyres and police sirens, the agreeably bubblegum-y 'Give Me All Your Luvin' (featuring Nicki Minaj), and the Justice-style 'I'm Addicted'. *MDNA* is big, certainly. And it's canny, if not clever. But essentially, it's the sound of a proven formula being tweaked. Again. *Sharon O'Connell*



The Mars Volta

Noctourniquet

★★★★★

The days of opening their albums with an explosive track is clearly a thing of the past for these El Paso proggers. As with their last album, *Octahedron*, first song 'The Whip Hand' is fairly timid, with a flat, off beat that sounds more like a

mistake. Looking past that, the quintet's sixth effort does offer some gems. 'Molochwalker' is a frenzy of riffs (think Led Zeppelin and Jimi Hendrix), while 'Lapochka' utilises piercing, Kraftwerk-style synths to great effect. It's a mishmash of tempos and techniques that'll leave you both euphoric and a bit queasy. *Danielle Goldstein*



This week's new bar review

Rivington Grill



Our well-connected Eating Out editor is the first to point out that the new Rivington Grill restaurant in the Madinat Jumeirah is the talk of the town. You, our dear readers, are keen too – our web stats tell us that *Time Out's* review of the restaurant last month is among the most viewed all year. So you can imagine the anticipation when we heard that, unlike its Souk Al Bahar predecessor, Dubai's second branch of the fancy British brand would host its own standalone bar, opening in the weeks

place where you wouldn't need to even touch your own bottle of grape (of which there's quite a range on offer). Food menus were yet to be printed when we stopped by, but staff recited a few rudimentary snacks – mini burgers, fish cakes and the like. When our goujons were excessively late, we were happy to see they knocked them off the bill.

For a bar a little over a week old, the terrace had already recruited a lively buzz of mixed groups, and by our second glass we were sold on this place. It was only stepping back inside to leave when the mask slipped slightly. In contrast to the terrace's carefully constructed charm, the indoor bar felt slightly stale. The oppressive wood panels lining the walls create the impression of gastropub rather than hip hangout, and the lack of any real decorative adornment leaves a largely dry and stale space recalling a waiting room. This is what this bar will be for many: a place to cradle a drink while awaiting a table in the restaurant.

As an al-fresco bar the Rivington shines, but we fear the sudden onset of summer could scupper this place's chances of creating an independent nightspot capable of charming the non-dining crowd.

Open Sat-Wed 6pm-11.30am, Thu-Fri 6pm-1.30am. Souk Madinat Jumeirah (04 366 6464).

The Rivington's bar boasts what might be our favourite Madinat vista

after the restaurant's grand launch. And now, after much pseudonym-touting and opening-date-change tomfoolery, we can report back.

When we visited, the staff were almost too eager to usher us up to the Madinat's top floor, listing drinks deals as we ascended a not-especially-inviting staircase. But the frenetic welcome was dispelled the moment we stepped out onto the bar's terrace. Resting on the top floor, more or less on top of The Agency, it boasts what might be our favourite Madinat vista: the complex's Lego-like Arabian towers have never looked so dreamlike. The dim lighting and wicker furniture serve the mood well, and while the upbeat house soundtrack was perhaps a little misplaced on a school night, it failed to crack the otherwise tranquil mood.

The staff's attentive gaze didn't falter throughout the evening, the regular visits to our table just the right side of intrusive; this is the kind of

