

McWilliams' classic piece on the state's "mission legend," where he takes up the contradiction between Anglo Californians' romantic obsession with their state's "Mission-Spanish past" and the poor treatment of contemporary Mexican-Americans. Material from *California: The Great Exception*, written shortly before McWilliams left the state in 1950 for New York and editorship of *The Nation*, is regrettably absent: He once described it as the summary of his efforts to understand the state.

But in its place, the *Reader's* final section is devoted to short pieces from *The Nation* on California's political scene. Collected here for the first time, they include descriptions of Earl Warren's tenure as governor and of the Tenney Committee (a California forerunner of HUAC), as well as such treasures as a 1950 description of Richard Nixon as "a dapper little man with an astonishing capacity for petty malice."

Even from New York, McWilliams' eyes were trained closely on California. References to early political consultants Murray Chotiner and the Spencer-Roberts firm suggest that McWilliams recognized their significance to California politics—and anticipated the emergence of paid political consulting as a national phenomenon—before almost anyone else. "How to Succeed with the Backlash," a look at the racial overtones of Ronald Reagan's gubernatorial campaign—"one of the most subtle and intensive racist political campaigns ever waged in a Northern or Western state"—is both incisive and disquietingly prophetic. The volume concludes with "Paradise Reagan-ed," written on the occasion of the Gipper's 1966 election. It is McWilliams at his most caustic and disaffected.

But it would be a mistake to remember him on this note. Although he was a piercingly ironic critic to the end, his was a criticism rooted in a profound sense of social justice and an abiding sense that California should, and could, be better. It would also be a mistake to remember McWilliams simply as a champion of California exceptionalism. When McWilliams is invoked today, it is most often for his commentary on California the quirky, California the anomalous, California the "island on the land."

While he found much that was spectacular and bizarre in California—he

once said that in 1920s Los Angeles he had found himself a "ringside seat at the year-round circus"—he also understood how intimately the state's fate was intertwined with the rest of the nation. Here, at the edge of the Pacific, was America's future, writ large and run amok. As he put it, "Here the swiftness of transition from rural to urban, from hardihood to wealth, has been most pronounced,

here the social neuroticism produced by such a transition is most widespread, and here the extremes between 'lowest' and 'highest' are most patent and glaring."

On this count, McWilliams was no liar, no lunatic and certainly no fool. ■

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## What's the Plan?

By Evan Endicott

**T**he Dismemberment Plan, a four-piece band from D.C., stand at a punk-rock crossroads. One fork leads the way to mainstream success and MTV heavy rotation. But they don't have

**Change**  
The Dismemberment Plan  
Desoto Records

Day-Glo hair or put porn stars on their album covers, and they certainly don't release Michael Jackson covers as singles.

The other path leads back to the underground that spawned them. But the Plan may not be welcome there either, as hardliners would surely balk at their penchant for synthesizers, samplers and guitar effects. And yet for all their refinements in sound, the Plan are the direct descendants of punk innovators and icons Fugazi, Jawbox and Shudder to Think, bands that once ruled the D.C. scene.

Over the course of four full-length

albums in eight years, the Plan have developed and refined a sound that mixes equal parts Elliott Smith pop smarts, Talking Heads white-boy funk and Shudder to Think weirdness. Throw in the Minutemen's sense of humor and you have a rough sketch. But like all forward-thinking punks, the Plan are more than the sum of their influences. Despite all the reference points, the group's albums sound startlingly unique. Only a deeper exploration of their work uncovers the punk

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family tree many youngsters wouldn't know existed if it dropped a bushel of mohawks in their lap: bands like Television

and Gang of Four, art students and radicals who pushed punk beyond four chords and a snotty British accent.

The Plan push further. They are a smart band, musically and lyrically, but they are not elitist (lead singer Travis Morrison candidly admits his taste for Britney-flavored cheese). They engage brain and booty equally, and this is the real secret to their success. It's the thing bands like Talking Heads understood, and the reason almost anyone can appreciate the music of George Clinton. Because, as human beings trapped on the physical plane, sound alone is not enough—we must shimmy and shake and move.

**E**mergency & I was released in 1999 and proved the Plan knew how to groove. Tracks like “Spider in the Snow” (which mixed equal parts ’80s synth-pop and Lee “Scratch” Perry dub-rhythm) and “A Life of Possibilities” (in which Morrison emulates Prince’s falsetto over a dirty bassline) rocked and rolled like some demented disco-beast with steel-toed boots and a union-jack tattoo. Hidden beneath the butt-shaking, Morrison’s lyrics revealed a wry but sympathetic observer of the human condition, able to mix abstract imagery, fantasy and heart-breaking truth with effortless grace. The album generated serious anticipation for their next effort, *Change*, released late last year.

On first listen, the aptly titled LP sounds like a major departure, with less visceral impact than the suckerpunch its predecessor delivered. But after a few spins, *Change* emerges as the band’s strongest, most cohesive work. “Sentimental Man” starts things off strong, but it’s the seamless transition into “The Face of the Earth” that hips you to the Plan’s evolution. As acoustic guitar plucking gives way to lumbering dub bass and reggae-like rhythm guitar scratches, a yearning Morrison melody addresses the titular theme that resounds throughout the album: separation and resolution, breaking up and moving on. Understated synth floats through the stereo field, lending a ghostly presence to the lyrics.

Elsewhere on the record, “Pay for the Piano” is a furious, Fugazi-style workout, full of awkward angles that resolve in a chorus of straight-line adrenaline. “Secret Curse” rips like early Sonic Youth (but with guitars in tune), mixing meaty rock

riffs with whispered verses and a lung-bursting chorus of “Please, please, please I’m sorry!” “The Other Side” features a standard pop chord progression, but drummer Joe Easley lays an inhuman drum ’n’ bass groove underneath the affair that must be heard to be believed.

The album’s closer, “Ellen & Ben,” is pure pop bliss: A video game synth riff winds its way around Easley’s hip-hop groove while disco guitars dance and Morrison sings about a pair of lovers “who made each other feel like they could die, but couldn’t stay the slightest of friends.” For an album about growing apart and growing up, it’s the perfect finale.

**B**ut *Change* is also an alarm call. Although major labels traffic in watered-down Punk Lite™ and the music’s rebel yell has been reduced to a meek, radio-friendly “Oi,” you can’t blame The Man entirely. Even punk’s most “hardcore” institutions, led by iconoclastic newsprint rag *Maximum Rockroll*, have helped foster the decline by proclaiming any music

without buzz-saw guitars or dexedrine-fueled screams “unpunk.”

The result of such scenester posturing was predictable: Divided we fall. Divisive politics, retro-kitsch and resistance to change have bled punk dry. Don’t let the Dismemberment Plan’s name fool you: This is a band about uniting body and mind, about making people think about punk rock as intensely as they feel its caged-animal energy.

Attend one of the Plan’s damn near religious live shows, and when the beer-bellied Milwaukee native next to you begins gyrating to “Spider in the Snow,” and the Costello-spectacled lad in the striped sweater next to him follows suit, you’ll understand what I mean by *unite*. You’ll understand why humans created punk rock in the first place. It’s the connection, the “silver thread imbedded deep within our spines” that binds us to one another. This is the Plan. This is how we change—for the better. ■

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## The Docs’ Good News

By Pat Aufderheide

**F**rom its crunchy-granola origins, the Sundance film festival has become a major marketplace at the base of a spectacular ski slope. Party tickets are as important as movie tickets, and lift tickets are only for civilians. Cell-phoned dealmakers in snowboots scout budding talent and find the next crop of upscale cineplex morsels. This year, for the first time, there was an official sales office for the industry.

Success or sellout? Some say the festival, and other projects of the Sundance Institute such as its production labs, has pushed independent filmmakers toward more palatable, commercial models. Others say Sundance has built important bridges between the industry and independents. Films such as *Amores Perros*, *Central Station*, *Smoke Signals* and *Like Water for Chocolate* have formed platforms for these debates.

Now, Sundance is spotlighting the industry’s stepchild, documentary. Doc filmmakers are typically driven by passion for their subject matter and social issues,

and the glam-celeb quotient is negligible. This year’s Sundance commitment was shown in four areas: programming, distribution, training and funding.

The documentary lineup was rich in important social themes. Kristi Jacobson’s *American Standoff*, a suspenseful story of organizing in the Teamsters, was produced by Barbara Kopple (with whose *Harlan County, U.S.A.* and *American Dream* this makes a tragic trilogy). Dan Gold and Judith Helfand’s *Blue Vinyl* chronicles with wry humor Helfand’s investigation of the toxic life cycle of polyvinyl chloride, as she searches for an alternative to vinyl siding on her parents’ home. *Sister Helen*, by Rebecca Cammisa and Rob Fruchtmann, follows a feisty old woman, a reformed drinker and lay nun, as she runs a group house for recovering addicts; in the process, it shows the many ways that highly imperfect people can do enormous good.

*Amandla! A Revolution in Four Part Harmony*, by Lee Hirsch, powerfully