

RED HOUSE PAINTERS

Down Colorful Hill

(4AD/All formats)

HOW MUCH heartbreak can you take? Where others apply pathos with a trowel, Red House Painters commandeer a fleet of industrial diggers to do the job . . . very, very quietly.

'Down Colorful Hill' is an unrelentingly sad record, remarkable because the desperation that pervades it is articulated with such stealthy, awesomely cool elegance. Six, very long, songs that nest in your sub-conscious and slowly, insidiously, rip you to pieces.

Nearest reference points are Big Star's 'Holocaust' stretched over the length of an album, or San Franciscan compatriots American Music Club, with their country roots and drunken self-pity replaced by a few old Cure records and a more clear-headed, analytical dissection of trauma.

Occasionally, inevitably perhaps, this pushes chief painter Mark Kozelek into cringeing blind alleys of self-consciousness.

Far more often, though, he evokes "Giving in to love/And sharing my time/Letting someone into my misery" in style, lamenting the passing of youth in the unnervingly stark opener, '24', harbouring paranoid homicidal thoughts for his girlfriend and suspiciously attentive best mate in the relatively rocking 'Lord Kill The Pain' and touchingly remembering a long-absent friend who's "lost his mind again" in 'Michael'.

And while he sings with the resigned, scarily becalmed air of a man far beyond explosive emotional displays, the other Red House Painters gently urge him along with all the empathy and consideration of expensive West Coast psychotherapists (the kind of help Kozelek obviously seems to need). So drums roll steadily, even militarily, one guitar takes a fragile, quavering line and another seethes and feeds back far away in the

clear-headed momentum, finally gatecrashing the rarified realm of *bona fide* chart stars. Part of this is down to stronger brand identity, replacing floating vocalist Plavka with Soul Family Sensation's Jhelisa Anderson and bringing Mr C's hyperactive rapping and *Thunderbirds* puppet dancing centre stage.

But a more important shift is that their oft-voiced experimentalism only now figures in band interviews and the occasional lyric, instead of shaping their musical direction as on earlier outings like the industrial politico-rap of 'In Gorbachev We Trust' or the cyberpunk techno manifesto 'En-Tact'. For all their underground trimmings and wiggly conceptualism, the upwardly mobile Shamen's new address is just off Main Street in downtown Pop City.

A desirable residence too, when it houses chunky disco chugalongs like last single 'LSI' — a slippery showcase for Mr C's hilariously camp, ice-cubes-down-the-underpants chatting style — or the titanic current smash 'Ebenezer Goode'. A cartwheeling jumble of mock-Cockney mateyness and blatant drug allusions, this knock-kneed album version nevertheless lacks the piledriver catchiness of its chart cousin or the precision-tooled magnificence of various 12-inch mixes.

Unfortunately, if inevitably, these twin peaks are

background.

The overall effect is a little precious, *genuinely* haunting and, when everything simmers perfectly for 'Medicine Bottle', really, *really* astonishing. Play in the dark and pretend to be 17, sensitive and significantly f—ed up again. (7)

John Mulvey



Crimsons of a gun Red House Painters