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NUVO Album review:
The Down-Fi, "America Now"

By Emma Faesi

The Down-Fi's pre-punk sound is a welcome refreshment in a town dominated by fast-paced hardcore, and serves as a good reminder of hardcore's roots. It's no surprise that these guys can pull off such vintage tunes with such finesse; they're led by Craig Bell, whose pedigree gives him serious street cred. He spent time with the Cleveland-based, short-lived (1974-75) proto-punk group Rocket From the Tombs, which can be credited with bringing the first stirrings of punk to the Midwest, and some of whose members went on to form The Dead Boys and Pere Ubu. Bell, involved with neither famous offshoot, ended up playing with a couple East coast bands that scored regional success, The Saucers and The Bell System. (A reunited Rocket from the Tombs featuring founding members like Bell as well as Television guitarist Richard Lloyd has played periodically throughout this decade, and worked up an album of re-recorded original material in 2004.)

Bell formed the Down-Fi with quality fellows hand-picked from The Dockers, Order of the Black Hand, The Relatives, and Hypnotic Velvet Propellers. Their debut CD, *America Now*, channels the Velvet Underground

and the New York Dolls, with just the right mix of punk attitude and shoot-from-the-hip classic rock. It opens with "Let it Go," a mid-tempo showcase of simplicity in a major-chord progression backed by drummer Mike Theodore's snappy hi-hat and snare taps. Bell's vocals belie his age, as do his swift fingers, which coax out a dirty, tastefully distorted solo. Two hipshaking numbers, "Tears in Her Eyes" and "'62 Hawk," pull some of their style from The Cramps, but don't lose an ounce of individuality. "Don't Keep Me Waiting," a lovelorn ballad opening with metallic guitar chords that quietly ring throughout the song, allows Jason Bambery's usually understated bass to take a more prominent role behind Bell's raw, wandering vocals.

Each track does something a little different while remaining in the same pre-punk vein: "So Cold" is a dysphoric crawl of minor-key scales and growly vocals that breaks into a bittersweet chorus and ends with a hollow, evocative amble of a guitar solo, while the appropriately menacing "Shit City" features impressive tremolo-picked bass and masterfully rolled toms. The album comes to a close with the title track, which builds tension by opening with a short instrumental section that breaks into a straightforward rock 'n' roll criticism of America now.