

At his best

Mike Cross' new album captures his musical creativity, high energy

By TOM MOORE

Mike Cross no doubt is a very talented performer but in the past, for many reasons, his albums have failed to capture all his musical skills, all his hyperkinetic energy that are always so evident when Cross is in concert. There's something about facing an audience that brings out the best in him so of course the logical way to display Cross's ample musical wares would be on a concert album.

Since Cross's new record, *Live & Kickin'*, recorded in Wilmington, follows this line of logic it is the best album he has ever done. In the past on *Born In The Country*, *The Bounty Hunter* and *Rock 'n' Rye* Cross was somewhat lost in a sea of slick production techniques.

When you wanted to hear just Cross singing or his virtuoso guitar or fiddle playing you also had to listen to all these extra guitar riffs and drums and seemingly scores of other instruments that bogged down what was good about the album. And you wondered how could any performer so pure and down-home in concert let himself get lost like this on his albums. (The problem with Cross's first and best album until now, *Child Prodigy*, was just the opposite that it was just a little too barren.)

But on *Live & Kickin'* what you get is pure Cross, with some able assistance by Zan McLeod on acoustic guitar, and guitar, banjo, mandolin, bouzouki and bass. Those familiar with Cross in concert and by his other records—and who that has lived in Chapel Hill for more than two weeks isn't—will know all the songs on this album practically by heart. But that doesn't matter because here they are presented in an unencumbered way that makes full enjoyment possible.

Country music today perhaps has more exciting performers than anytime before in its short history. And though he's not as well known as people like Willie Nelson and Johnny Cash and other biggies, Cross belongs right up there with the best when it comes to talent. He has a fine voice and an uncanny ability to pick a guitar and fiddle like mad.

And he gives himself such good material on songs like "The Bounty Hunter," "Elma Turl," "Kentucky Song," and "The Scotsman." In his songs, Cross is able to combine a great raucous wit with a wise sense of compassion, something few country artists other than Woody Guthrie, Hank Williams and the early Steve Goodman and the early Jimmy Buffet have been able to do. With all this going for him it seemed a shame that his past albums didn't nearly do Cross justice.

But listen to the "Good Night Medley" on *Live & Kickin'*. With the combination of "The Otter's Holt," "Farwell to Erin, Good Night," "Loch Lomond," "The Banshee," "The 8th of January," (also known as "The Battle of New Orleans") and "June Apple" you hear fiddle music as it leaves Scotland and Ireland and travels to the mountains and plains of America. It's magic because it's the history of America and country music in a nutshell. And because it's Mike Cross at his best, alive and kickin'.

Mike Cross will appear at Duke's Page Auditorium, Friday, September 18. S

Tom Moore is the arts editor for *The Daily Tar Heel*.

Filmclips

Melvin and Howard is the most original American comedy in years. The story of Melvin Dummar, wonderfully played by Paul Le Mat, and his rendezvous in the Nevada desert with Howard Hughes, Jason Robards at his cackling best, has been fashioned into a warm-hearted film that examines the root of the American Dream—the continual striving for success—and how it keeps the poor in line. The film met with critical success and even won two Oscars (Mary Steenburgen for best supporting actress and Bo Goldman for best original screenplay). But it's back as late show this weekend at the Carolina and if you miss it again it's your fault.

Arthur has two very witty performances by John Gielgud and Dudley Moore who play a butler and a young carefree playboy who have sort of a father and son relationship full of sarcasm on the surface, but with love lurking underneath. Too bad that such wonderful performances are stuck in this misguided attempt to resurrect the Screwball mode of comedy. *Arthur* tries to be a critical class comedy without ever being too critical of wealth. But Gielgud and Moore are worth watching despite all the blandness. At the Plaza.

Raiders of the Lost Ark is riveting fun. Director Steven Spielberg serves an updated Monogram and Republic serial with all the action and none of the cliches. He plays against audience expectations in this tall tale about Indiana Jones, a part time professor and part-time archeologist, who goes off on a quest for the powerful ark of the covenant before Hitler and the Nazis can get a hold of it. Silly stuff, yes, but it's too marvelously entertaining for anyone in his right mind to really care. At the Ram Triple.

—Tom Moore

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