

Features

U2, Blur, and Ben Folds Five make stellar albums



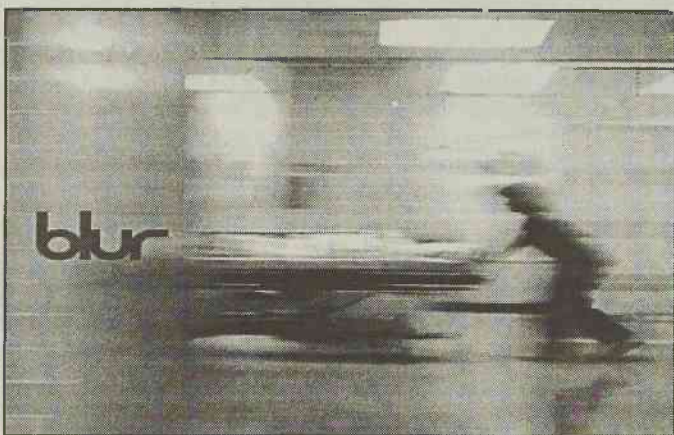
COURTESY OF ISLAND RECORDS

By Brian Castle
Features Editor

U2, the biggest band in the world, has returned with their first studio album since 1994's "Zooropa." "Pop" (out now on Island Records) sees the Irish superstars heading farther toward the techno apocalypse first hinted at on "Zooropa" and 1991's "Achtung Baby." Long gone are the band's white flag-waving days. U2 has obviously been listening to the Chemical Brothers and The Prodigy, the British leaders of the current electronic zeitgeist catching hold in the U. S. record industry. But "Pop" is no ripoff of the techno craze, as the group retains its identity within the sound. Throughout the album, Bono's lyrics are as anthemic and majestic as ever. The guitar sound that The Edge invented permeates the sonic soundscapes laid down by the rhythm

section of bassist Adam Clayton and drummer Larry Mullen, Jr. While "Zooropa" failed to reach U2's core audience with its dance experimentation, songs like leadoff single "Discotheque" will bring fans of techno and fans of rock together. The song features Bono singing about love, while The Edge's gun-blast guitar work (reminiscent of "Bullet the Blue Sky") collides with the swirling synthesizers from producer Flood, booming bass of Clayton, and the dance-floor drum programs of Mullen. "Discotheque" sets the pace for the album, and "Pop" never lets up on its listeners. "Pop" contains something for every U2 fan, and should bring many more into the already-bulging fold. In keeping up with the times and retaining their band identity in the process, U2 have created their best album since 1987's "The Joshua Tree." "Pop" is a masterpiece.

England's Blur has also taken another direction in its music. With the band's eponymously-titled fifth album (out now on Virgin Records), Blur seems to be taking one last stab at massive American success with an album that is full-on ROCK. Once the kings of British pop with their ever-changing styles (Stone Roses-era baggy, Kinks and Who-styled Mod, Madness and English Beat ska), Blur has seen its fortunes decline at the hands of the new kings of England, Oasis. With "Blur," the boys from London are evidently trying to beat the men from Manchester at their own game—rock and roll. And they just about pull it off, too.



COURTESY OF VIRGIN RECORDS

The first two songs, the cracking singles "Beetlebum" and "Song 2," signal a new era for singer/songwriter Damon Albarn and company. "Beetlebum" seems to be loosely patterned after The Beatles' "Why Don't We Do It in the Road," and

with occasional blasts of electric guitar from Graham Coxon. The new music to virtually the same lyrics takes all of the irony out that made Blur so endearing in the first place. Still, "Blur" is, overall, an ace album.

"Song 2" is unbridled punk. But after these two breakthrough tracks, the album begins to fade into rewrites of their own songs, as if they are so guilty about their pop past that they feel the need to rewrite their back catalog as rock songs. For instance, "Country Sad Ballad Man" is simply an acoustic rewrite of their own smash single, "Country House." The song, like "Country House," is about a depressed guy who lives way out in the country and does nothing but watch television. But instead of accompanying the song with the oompah horn section and wibbly guitar sounds, they choose to employ a simple acoustic guitar



COURTESY OF CAROLINE RECORDS

Finally, a band that has no problems with its sound and keeps on churning out stellar music with each go-around. Chapel Hill's Ben Folds Five returns its second album, "Whatever and Ever Amen," (out now on Caroline Records) a continuation of the group's unique three-piece sound. Ben Folds Five is one of the more unique bands in America today. Led by singer/songwriter/pianist Ben Folds, the Five (actually Folds, bassist Darren Jesse and drummer Robert Sledge) plays heavily on generation X whimsy and frustration over a soundtrack that evokes early Billy Joel (before his fall into VH1 lethargy: think "Piano Man") and Randy Newman ("Short People"). But don't think that because their music is piano-driven Folds and Co. are light pop—they rock the house as well as any guitar band. The new single, "The Ballad of Who Could Care Less," features the ingenious lyrics of Ben Folds at his very best: "I've got this great idea/ Maybe we can pitch it to the Franklin mint/

Fine pewter portraits of general apathy and major boredom singing... whatever and ever amen." Folds' songwriting persona of the sardonic ne'er-do-well is hilarious at times like this, when a whole generation of kids are loafing on the streets.

MUSIC REVIEW

While most of the album is downbeat when compared to the Five's rollicking, self-titled debut from last year, the songs are every bit as entertaining and even compelling. "Whatever and Ever Amen" is the best of March's bumper crop of new rock albums, including U2's "Pop." The next Billy Joel lives right here in North Carolina. Hopefully Ben Folds won't get messed up by a model.

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