

The Newsboys Go Disco; Elastica's Return Not Worth 5-Year Wait

Big L *The Big Picture*

On February 15, 1999, Big L was found face-down, with nine bullets in his face and chest, at the Church's Chicken on 139th Street near his Harlem home.

The hip-hop world was immediately disgusted at the waste of the life and career of an up-and-coming emcee. The shooting allegedly resulted from beef over a death some say L set up.

A year and a half later, L's murder suspect is behind bars, and *The Big Picture*, a posthumous showcase of L's work, has been released.

The music isn't exactly radio-friendly, but the beats allow L's lyricism to shine. Unlike Eminem, who needs Dr. Dre's beats as an anchor through his lyrics are already tight, L is strictly about his words, and not the beat's catchiness. No Timbaland, no Swizz, just really raw, hard-core, undergroundish Roc Raida and Primo stuff, which L flows over with wit, sharpness and accuracy.

Hip-hop fans should buy this album just for one thing. In one of the best freestyles ever, L raps: "A while back I used to hustle/Sellin' blow in the park/Countin' G stacks and rockin' ice that glow in the dark ... Fuckin' punk, you ain't a leader, what? Nobody followed you ... Before I buck lead, and make a lot of blood shed/ Turn your tux red, I'm far from broke, got enough bread and mad hos/ Ask Beavis, I get nuttin' Butt-head."

The Big Picture's guest artists are most notably L's D.I.T.C. (Diggin' in the Crates) crew members Fat Joe, A.G. and O.C. Others include Tupac, Big Daddy Kane, KRS-One, Kool G Rap, Stan Spit and female newcomer Remi Martin.

L's most popular single, "Ebonics," is also included: "My weed smoke is my lah/ A key of coke is a pie/ When I'm lifted, I'm high ... Cars is whips/ Sneakers is kicks ..."

You get the picture. The video for "Holdin' It Down" is currently rotating on BET. It's a fun track that introduces L's style, music and crew to those that just don't know.

L, after Biggie and Tupac, might be the biggest loss hip hop has suffered due to violence. Hip hop doesn't necessarily condone violence, as some may conclude from the recent catastrophe at The Source Awards, where fights shut down the show. Unfortunately, that's how the stakes go down when people let their insecurities and beef consume their ability to act sensibly, eventually affecting people like L firsthand.

Newsboys *Love Liberty Disco*

★★★★ 1/2

The definition of eclectic, the Newsboys' *Love Liberty Disco* combines gruff vocals with strains of uplifting music, focusing on the concept of universal love in true-to-disco-era fashion.

Diversity is key: the medley of songs avoids blending into the background, and the exploration of the disco sound doesn't monopolize the album.

The sound of tentative, ethereal strings and guitar chords piques interest in the opener "Beautiful Sound" and draws out the Aussie accent of lead singer Peter Furler.

Since the Newsboys' previous lead singer, John James, left the group, it has evolved considerably, breaking away from the classic Newsboys Christian rock of the 1996's *Take Me to Your Leader* and 1998's *Step Up to the Microphone*.

Highlights on the new album include "Beautiful Sound," "Say You Need Love" and the title cut, "Love Liberty Disco." For listeners appreciative of the disco sound, the latter two songs evoke flashbacks of "Saturday Night Fever." They capture a neo-disco sound with

copious hand-clapping and gruff vocals. The track "Say You Need Love" is stellar in its combination of descriptive imagery and smooth strings.

But compared to its spontaneous beginning, *Love Liberty Disco* winds up languidly. What comes later can't measure up to the album's initial glory.

Instead of the droning of "Surrender All" and indistinguishable lyrics of "Fall on You," the album would have benefited from a few energetic songs placed near the conclusion.

The CD's length should also be a consideration when a consumer is debating whether to pay full CD price for 35 minutes of entertainment.

The Newsboys, as a Christian/pop/alternative group, appeal to their audience by using a first-person point of view in their lyrics and aiming their emphasis at the individual.

Christianity, although ultimately the focus of each song, is a subtle influence — perhaps the band is trying to reach out to both secular and religious crowds through its omission of direct references to God or Jesus. The album avoids a preachy, holier-than-thou take, instead stressing the universal love embraced by the disco era "that unites us all."

By Kit Foss

Elastica *The Menace*

★★★ 1/2

When Elastica appeared in 1995, the band's smart, sexy, self-titled first album rocketed past Oasis to become the fastest-selling debut in the U.K.

But that was five years ago, and a lot has changed since then. Britpop has been all but dethroned by electronica in England, and most people in the United States probably only vaguely remember "Connection," Elastica's stateside hit.

It's been five years of silence from Elastica while the music world passed

by, with only the peep of an EP in 1999 to remind fans that the band still existed.

After the stress of various member comings and goings (there are six now, instead of four) and vocalist Justine Frischmann's much-publicized breakup with Blur frontman Damon Albarn, you could say that Elastica deserves a break.

But five years is a long time to wait for a sophomore album from a band that isn't exactly integral to the state of modern rock. It's tough, even for fans of the group's debut, to retain interest through such a dry spell.

Moreover, new inductees won't find anything too special on *The Menace*. The band has dismissed much of *Elastica's* melody, leaving more angular pop-punk and adding dreamy dirges.

It's not a revolutionary musical step, and it's certainly one that a band doesn't need five years to take. Plus, it sucked all the fun out of things, with sassy pop songs largely replaced by dissonance and layers of synth noise.

The group still retains enough of its derivative New Wave sound that it's easy to see why *Elastica* brought the band Blondie comparisons and two copyright infringement lawsuits.

And Frischmann's petulant, English-accented vocals still drive the album; she has the kind of voice you just know comes from a sexily pouting mouth.

But she uses it too often to snarl idiocies like "See you later alligator" or the silly acrostic of "How to Spell Elastica Man" ("E - extra special," and so on).

There are a few bright spots, notably the irresistible punk hooks of the all-too-brief "Generator" and the hushed confessional of the ambient "My Sex."

But the music seems awfully uncomplicated to be the work of six musicians, and then there's the less-than-inspired decision to close the album with a cover of Trio's "Da Da Da" (Yes, it's that song from the Volkswagen commercial).



Former Squirrel Nut Zipper Tom Maxwell turns in an impressive solo debut on the self-released *Samsara*.

While *The Menace* has its shortcomings, Elastica is still an original in the post-millennial music spectrum — no one else seems to be rehashing New Wave punk right now, or at least not in quite the same way. Perhaps future (and more timely) albums will deliver on Elastica's potential.

By Ashley Atkinson

Tom Maxwell *Samsara*

★★★★

Tom Maxwell's *Samsara* expertly combines roots rock, blues, swing and jazz to create an exciting and refreshingly unusual album.

Maxwell, formerly of the Squirrel Nut Zippers, has compiled an album that deftly delves into multiple musical genres. Backed by members of the Zippers, *Samsara* showcases exceptional musicianship paired with excellent vocal harmonization.

One of the opening numbers, "Uptown Stomp," features lively trumpet and saxophone lines that mesh perfectly with Maxwell's grainy voice.

In "If I Had You," the earthy voice of Holly Baddour magically harmonizes with both Maxwell and the airy piano accompaniment.

Samsara also successfully keeps an exciting energy flow. Maxwell's song lineup blends fast-paced swing with country-western ballads, never once losing the upbeat mood of the album.

"Flame In My Heart" plunges wholeheartedly into a country twang, and features wonderful acoustic guitar picking that is unfortunately dominated by the vocal harmonization between Maxwell and his wife, Melanie.

Samsara is a complete album, offering a full plate for the musical appetite. Impressive musical ability waits at every turn, making the album a great pick.

By Karen Whichard

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Coens' 'Blood Simple' Anything But

By JEREMY HURTZ
Assistant Arts & Entertainment Editor

"Blood Simple," the first film from the Coen brothers, is complicated. Though its themes are more straightforward than those of the duo's later, infamous "Fargo," its crime-noir story twists and



"Blood Simple" ★★★★★

catches like strange plumbing.

Originally released in 1985, the film now returns to theatres as a remastered director's cut.

Is Abby (Frances McDormand) sleeping with Ray (John Getz) to coerce him into killing her husband Marty (Dan Hedaya)? The plot starts winding immediately, rendering this important relationship unclear from the beginning. We don't get a feel for either lover's personality until well after Marty hires a P.I. (M. Emmet Walsh) to kill the cheating couple. By that point we ought to care for and fear for them, but we don't.

This problem is a result of the Coens' gift for hilarious vernacular dialogue — which often conveys essential information in a realistically roundabout way — combined with the initial half-hour's fast setup.

Subversive social satire is a Coen hallmark. In "Blood Simple" the satire isn't subversive — the interaction of intelligent people with stupid people, for instance, is played just for laughs. McDormand witlessly babbles in bed; her lover asks her if she ever gets tired. "Yeah," she replies, uncomprehending. "Sometimes. Uh-huh."

Fifteen-year-old low-budget films usually display bad deterioration, but thanks to a top-notch restoration job, "Blood Simple" looks sharp. Still, tell-tale make plain the film's cheap indie nature: oddly precise editing, poor lighting, touched-up grain.

Usually the director's cut of a film is longer than the original. Often directors use this phrase to reinstate peripheral scenes for the sake of making deleted footage available.

But Ethan and Joel Coen have made few additions to this newly restored print of their debut — and many subtractions. They've excised "some of the boring stuff," as a new introduction states, in the interests of cutting to the plot's chase.

And what a chase it is. After the initial confusion over who's screwing whom and who's screwing whom over, the smart, allusive script finds traction and runs. A crime occurs, and everyone thinks someone else is responsible. Perhaps none of them is right, or all.

It's not a whodunit — the audience knows who — rather, as with "Fargo," it is a character study. Because the plot, though outstanding, remains conventional, much weight is placed on the actors' shoulders.

Each performs admirably; the young McDormand's uncanny mix of feminine vulnerability and equally feminine strength seems destined for success. So do the Coens, their superb imagery and squirming tension in full swing. It's satisfying to see a picture brimming with promise and to know that promise has since been realized.

The Arts & Entertainment Editor can be reached at artsdesk@unc.edu.

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