

Growing Pains: At the Drive-In Explores, Barenaked Ladies Lose Edge

At the Drive-In Relationship of Command

Rock bands generally age just like people do. They get older, their joints stiffen up, it gets a little harder for them to get up the stairs. After a while they're no longer that guy who runs around the party with a lamp shade on his head, but the guy who stands in the corner sipping imported beer and talking movies.

But aging's only natural, and isn't necessarily a bad thing. Just look at bands like Superchunk, Yo La Tengo and Fugazi — bands that have only grown more solid as they mature.

Such is the case with At the Drive-In. The El Paso, Texas, quintet's fifth release, *Relationship of Command*, is a more mature record than previous albums, but by no means signals that the band is on its way out.

At the Drive-In has always played up the diversity of its influences, from punk to reggae, techno to world music. These seemingly incongruous sounds make for an odd mix — anthem-like, triumphant music somewhere between punk and indie rock, delivered with as much force and energy as humanly possible (ATDI is one of the best live rock bands around). But on *Relationship*, the boys discover new ways of exploring their influences, realizing a darker, more serious sound.

The surging energy is still there, but more directed and restrained. Mid-tempo rockers abound, as opposed to the "omigod-how-do-they-do-that?" explosive songbursts of 1999's *Vaya* and 1998's *In/Casino/Out*.

Vocalist Cedric stretches the emotion and intensity of his feral roar to new levels. The band makes use of more effects, piano, electronic percussion and keyboards.

Relationship is definitely the band's most polished release yet. Iggy Pop even contributes, although I'm not sure in what capacity, and the liner notes don't say on which tracks.

A few tracks, such as "Pattern Against User" and "Sleepwalk Capsules" harken back to the oddly pop-like, bombastic anthems of *In/Casino/Out*.

But At the Drive-In has somehow figured out how to slow the tempo, show some restraint and still channel enough raw energy through their instruments to power a small city.

"One Armed Scissor" and "Invalid Litter Dept." are great exercises in dynamics and tone. It seems as if the band wants to know just how high it can

push the energy level before yanking the plug.

But unfortunately *Relationship* doesn't keep the energy flowing. The middle of the record gets somewhat monotonous and starts to sag. Redundant riffing slows the momentum.

Even if a few songs lag behind the others, you could still spend hours trying to figure out Cedric's morbidly cryptic lyrics. "X marks the spot/On your calendar days/A beard half-eaten/Smiled, crawling with legs," he shouts on "Rolodex Propaganda."

Relationship's elusive lyrics, the weirdest of any At the Drive-In record, are just one more sign of a band stretching itself. The kids from El Paso are growing up and coming into their own.

By Brian Bedworth

Barenaked Ladies Maroon

The Barenaked Ladies have changed hats, so to speak, and would have us believe that the members have grown up on their new album, *Maroon*. Unfortunately, the edgier, more mature sound toward which they move shows more of a continuing assimilation into commercial American pop than actual musical development.

Before *Rock Spectacle* catapulted the band from the Canadian wilderness to American arenas, its music was at least unique, though sometimes silly, and often fun and poignant.

"Pinch Me," the new album's first single, smacks less of that past originality than Train's 1999 banal hit "Meet Virginia." Lyrically, the song represents the most substantial of the album's growth from 1998's *Stunt*, but it is one of very few examples.

Trying to mix more serious themes with the quirkiness of old-school BNL comes off sounding either uncomfortable or shallow, rather than balanced between depth and humor as is seemingly sought.

"Tonight Is the Night I Fell Asleep at the Wheel," written from the perspective of a dead narrator, embodies the worst of the awkward combination. The narrator speaks of dying in his car as others "stand around with their mouths open wide/I heard some idiot ask if someone's inside/With the Jaws of Life they tried and they tried."

The song's accordion and banjo riffs remind one of Kermit the Frog's "The Rainbow Connection" and evoke even less sympathy. Instead of sounding iron-

ic, the song leaves the listener with the sense that BNL has a difficult time taking itself seriously in its new role as a dynamic band with a keen pop sensibility.

The pseudo-gravity of the album generates several pieces (such as "Off the Hook," "Helicopters," "Conventioners") that sound eerily similar to Mike and the Mechanics and cover themes ranging from bombings to love.

However, a distinct aversion to lyrics that are too deep for radio belies the image of maturity. Hence, they lack the authenticity and impact of pre-*Stunt* songs like "Brian Wilson" and "Break Your Heart."

The album's lighter songs, likewise, yield much of the band's trademark zaniness to slick cuteness. They offer their share of catchy hooks, but at the expense of muzzling the band's substantial musical ability.

The band sacrifices creativity for "mature," conventional pop on *Maroon* as only adults can do. BNL's new look, however, is about as effective as the emperor's new clothes.

By Warren Wilson

Los Amigos Invisibles Arepa 3000: A Venezuelan Journey Into Space

Picture, if you can, John Travolta dancing away in "Fiebre de Sabado Noche." That's a start.

A mix of disco and Latin music makes up the majority of the songs on Los Amigos Invisibles' album, *Arepa 3000: A Venezuelan Journey Into Space*, to be released in October.

The band is composed of six Venezuelan men with their hormones in overdrive.

That said, it should be obvious the CD is not for the timid, but I'll state for the record that all those dirty Spanish words you learned in middle school will come in handy if you try to translate the lyrics.

The mix of Latin music with disco beats is original enough to catch your attention, but there is simply not enough variety within the songs themselves to make the album qualify as anything worth merit.

This self-proclaimed "dance band" got its start hosting underground club nights in Venezuela.

It uses all live instruments to produce a techno sound without the use of groove boxes or the like.

Figuring in this background, it is

obvious that the group intends to get you out on the dance floor.

Initially, the band meets its goal as the first few songs are able to get your feet tapping.

However, as the CD plays on, the Latin disco theme gets worn out. The later songs get monotonous and lack the same make-you-want-to-dance quality that the first few songs possess.

To put it bluntly, the songs get boring. They lack originality and make you want to grab any other CD for some variety.

Yet the album does contain gems such as "La Vecina."

The song has an infectious beat and catchy lyrics, even if they are in Spanish. It is for this reason I can say the band has some promise for future works.

At worst, the album is an unnecessary return to the age of disco with a group of Rico Suave wannabes.

At best, it's an original twist on a tired music genre, which allows the album to pass as decent background music.

By Aimee Wilson

Joan Osborne Righteous Love

God bless Joan Osborne. Although many Joplin-esque blueswomen turned their sad tales and hot moments into mainstream-accessible music, few have taken huge artistic risks as successful, albeit polarizing, as Osborne's second album, *Righteous Love*.

Relish became a popular and critical powerhouse in 1995, largely because of Osborne's wild-haired mixture of sexual tension, individualistic religious integrity and listener-friendly blues licks.

It's what made the record a revelation — Osborne's debut finally provided popular music the perfect balance between the Staple Singers and Madonna.

But, surprisingly, the dynamo energy of *Relish* is absent on *Righteous Love*, and will probably turn off some fans at first listen. Five years after Osborne stressed her powerful pipes, her refined, sultry vocals on *Righteous Love* sound bored by comparison.

None of the songs on the album kick into full gear as fully as they did on *Relish*. On a few occasions, God forbid, Osborne's vocals at first sound frighteningly similar to Bette Midler (shudder).

Instead of getting steamrolled on the first listen, *Righteous Love* is an album that displays its magic slowly.

Having expanded her vocal horizons away from all-out belting, Osborne



Joan Osborne takes a new musical approach on *Righteous Love*, adding Indian influences to her mix of God, sex and the blues.

embraced Indian classical and qawwali styles. Osborne has discarded any "blues shouter" clichés in favor of a sleek, vampy style ultimately no less evocative (or provocative) than her work on *Relish*.

This immersion into Indian music has affected Osborne's well-documented spirituality as well.

Thematically, *Righteous Love* is a logical progression from the *Relish*-era. Whereas *Relish* featured songs of broken women and sexual freedom — stressing the fact that the two need not be synonymous — *Righteous Love* focuses primarily on love's ability to transform, completely fusing spiritual and sexual love in the process.

For this reason, *Righteous Love's* tracks could be considered hymns or songs for

eager guys to put on before a midnight tryst. Osborne's subject on "My Love Is Alive" could be God, or a man walking down the street, for all the listener knows.

On "Grand Illusion," the album's most moving track, Osborne sings as if enlightened. The song celebrates the destruction of self-absorption before self-awareness kicks in, buoyed throughout with a bubbly, '80s synth-blues hybrid.

This album could be considered Osborne's sophomore slump or second debut album, depending on the listener's sensibilities and patience. But spend a little time with the album and you'll be handsomely rewarded.

By Russ Lane

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