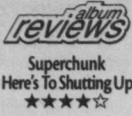


Superchunk Re-emerges With Polished Sheen

BY BRIAN BEDSWORTH
Senior Writer

Like Time Out Chicken 'n Biscuits or the Cat's Cradle, Superchunk is a Chapel Hill institution. And like most institutions, it got that way because it did something consistently well.



The stalwart rockers have been cranking out their distinctive brand of amped up power-pop for more than a decade now, wowing audiences across the country and the globe.

The band was almost solely responsible for catapulting Chapel Hill onto the national cool map with its 1990 single "Slack Motherfucker." On *Here's to Shutting Up*, the band's eighth full-length album, Superchunk continue its commitment to excellence. The record also continues Superchunk's evolution so

evidenced by 1999's *Come Pick Me Up*. The record's rich, layered compositions — at times beautiful, at times rocking, at times both — are the sounds of a band confident in its maturity.

For the past two albums Superchunk has gradually turned down the volume, replacing kinetic energy with increased ingenuity. With *Here's to Shutting Up*, the band has arrived at what it was striving for before — a fully developed new Superchunk sound. The distorted guitars, driving bass and bombastic drums are still there, but now strings, organs, acoustic guitars and even a lap steel fill things out.

McCaughan's voice, which reached a surprisingly high falsetto on *Come Pick Me Up*, has dropped a few notes. Even though it's still higher than anything on older albums it works well on this record. The falsetto seemed a little strained and not sure on *Come Pick Me Up*, but McCaughan seems confident in his vocal range now.

Not only that, he has reached a new level of songwriting. The slacker

anthems and rockers of *On the Mouth* or other releases have been completely replaced with contemplative, superbly constructed lyrical compositions complete with multilayered harmonies.

Among the most noticeable departures from the Superchunk canon is the laid-back country rocker "Phone Sex." The violin, lap steel and a driving 3/3 beat almost sound more like Whiskeytown than Superchunk. Harmonies drip like syrup over the infectious melody, and the eerily appropriate (but completely coincidental) chorus — "Plane crash footage on TV/ I know, I know that could be me" — make the song even more memorable.

Heavy on the keyboards and strings, "The Animal Has Left its Shell" and "What Do You Look Forward To?" slow the tempo down even more for two of the band's best ballads. Making a kind of indie-easy listening, it's a testament to Superchunk's range that they can rock so hard yet still make music your par-

ents could make out to. But there's still rock aplenty on *Here's to Shutting Up*. "Rainy Streets" has all the anthemic immediacy that makes the band's live audiences pogo up and down like coked-up kangaroos. Likewise for "Out on the Wing" and "Art Class." The main difference between these and rockers from older albums is that instead of pulling out all the stops, Superchunk has precisely calculated notes and structure to achieve a paradoxically maximum yet restrained rock value.

There are those who will say that Superchunk has lost whatever gift it had, that they're past their prime. But Superchunk is just getting its second wind.

Yes, the band is an institution. But unlike most institutions this one is constantly looking forward and evolving. And it rocks harder than a Time Out sausage biscuit ever could.

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



Here's to Shutting Up, Superchunk's eighth studio album, combines the band's traditional rock sound with layered production techniques.

Gibbs Band Cranks Out Backwater Brilliance; Bad Ronald Offends With Monotony

EMMA GIBBS BAND
Out of the Country

The Winston-Salem-based Emma Gibbs Band maintains its interesting and joyful mix that's ultimately neo-country for the young city boy.

On its fourth album, *Out to the*

Country, the band blends facets of every genre from country to bluegrass to classic rock. The album comes off with a cool, casual and eclectic sound made famous by its third album *Seven Even*.

But the musical talent, lyrics and members have matured, creating a more harmonious and peaceful sound.

Throughout the album, the band's members sing about their tired bodies, tattered clothes and traveling blues in a life-long journey. Balanced between head-bobbing folk beats ("Hole in the Dark," "Engineer") and tranquil instrumental interludes ("99 flood," "Never Been to Heaven"), the album is smooth and seamless yet youthfully intense.

"Black Road," in particular, stands out with its fervent guitar solos and light-hearted lyrics — all with a sound that is characteristically Emma Gibbs.

Will Straughan's vocals come across as powerful and versatile, equally capable of country twangs and hopeful moans. Complementing his graceful mandolin scales are Drew Cannon and Richard Upchurch's dueling guitars, leaving plenty of room for enchanting solos and tunes that stretch out and weave back together.

A truly versatile musician, Straughan's wailing lap-steel creates a psychedelic country tune supported by driving bass and drums, played by Jeff Rensburg and George Wallis respectively. Above all, Brent Buckner's harmonica sings intensely, making you want to dance and just sit back and relax at the same time.

Not conforming to any specific genre yet exceptional for that exact reason, Emma Gibbs Band sounds like a backwater Bob Dylan, comfortable on any lost and lonely lopsided porch.

Out to the Country showcases the band's talent and individuality in a hypnotic album that the band will showcase at its CD release party at 9:30 p.m. Friday at Raleigh's Lincoln Theatre. Both the show and the new album should keep country-hungry city boys happy for awhile.

By Nick Parker

But decent music and redoing the classics don't redeem the album completely — the random use of turntables and electronics gets old after a while.

In spite of its generic rap-rock feel, Bad Ronald has some, albeit buried, degree of musical talent. But it's clear the band does have a lot of maturing to do.

By Graham Parker

30 Odd Foot of Grunts
Bastard Life or Clarity

It has been said that everybody wants to be a rock star, and apparently that proposition extends to the highest echelons of Hollywood.

Keanu Reeves and Kevin Bacon have blazed the way for movie stars who can't resist getting their groove on, and now "Gladiator" Russell Crowe follows suit with 30 Odd Foot of Grunts.

Since the band actually existed before Crowe became famous as an actor in the '90s, it's unfair to accuse TOFOG (the band's preferred nickname) of being a vanity project. But it seems unlikely that the group would be reaping the benefits of an American record release without its burly, Oscar-winning frontman.

TOFOG plays Aussie folk, a configuration of old-school punk, and they even cover Beethoven with an electric guitar rendering of "Ode to Joy" rounding out the song "Lost On Tour."

But the down-home sound the group strives for never really comes across. For a record that would benefit from a more hard-edged, unpolished feel, the production of the album is too precise, leaving many songs feeling stale and flat.

The album's single, "Things Have Got To Change," is a toe-curling embarrassment, burdened by corny emotional build-ups of Crowe belting out lyrics that would make Bryan Adams cringe.

Likewise, songs like "Wendy" and "Memorial Day," in which Crowe pens his most personal words, tend to be the most unconvincing efforts. More often than not, the music fails to conceal the throwaway "emotional" lyrics.

But occasionally the group gets it right. "Swept Away Bayou" is a juke joint foot-stomper that finds energy in its quick, rolling pace and the welcome presence of a blues violin.

But this could all be a moot point, since most people won't be listening to TOFOG for the music.

Obviously the main attraction here is Crowe, and it will be his name that earns TOFOG any attention at all. For a performer who has made a name for himself by tackling memorable roles, it's a shame that his music is quite the opposite.

By Jeremy Fisher

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