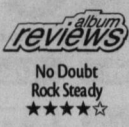


# No Doubt Surprises Longtime Fans With Club-Ready Dance Album

By Elliott Dube  
Staff Writer



It's unexpected that a band previously known for ska-punk music can make such a successful dance record. But No Doubt has pulled it off and reinvented itself with *Rock Steady*. Sure, the group recalls trusted reggae and dub elements, but the album is also notable for its marching beats, club-ready grooves and keyboard effects reminiscent of '80s dance-pop. These sounds are evident from the first song, the lively "Hella Good," to the

closing title track. The band uses a noisy approach to a lesser extent than on their previous albums, and most of *Rock Steady* is marked by refinement and attention to song structure. The new style might be disconcerting for longtime fans, so more than one listen might be warranted. But once the group's direction becomes clear, it's easier to appreciate the shift. *Rock Steady* is full of effective, competent dance music. It's a sign that Gwen Stefani and company are still going strong and evolving, as their music calls for folks to shake their booties rather than to rock out. Thankfully, while the group's sound has changed, the personal and revealing nature of Gwen Stefani's lyrics have not.

The emotional complexity she showcased on 2000's *Return of Saturn* is still here in full force to help give this album an edge. Stefani has a lot to sing about because of her past heartbreaks and her current engagement to Bush's Gavin Rossdale. "And the flowers arrive to my surprise/But that just ain't good enough" she sings in "Making Out." The tune's wicked bass accompanies Stefani as she laments her constant separation from

her fiancé due to touring and other superstar duties. Ironically, *Rock Steady* probably will make Stefani into an even bigger star. She already has had increased exposure through appearances on tracks by Moby and Eve. With this effort, she continues to dominate the spotlight. The album takes full advantage of her sexy voice, which alternately exudes cunning and vulnerability. The work also benefits from the band's long-stand-

ing penchant to fuse together different genres of music. The album is mainstream-ready throughout with its finely polished mixture of pop, ska, hip hop, rock and dance. The band used a wide array of producers from reggae legends Sly & Prince to Ric Ocasek. While this series of collaborations has resulted in a number of gems, there are a couple of small missteps. The uninteresting single "Hey Baby" sounds like something Max Martin should have written for Britney Spears. But overall *Rock Steady* generally flows well and is musically and lyrically consistent. And it's fun. The newest LP is a lot more fun than the weighty and ambitious *Saturn*. With its new effort, the

band came back to party, and the album is decidedly vibrant, upbeat and above all, danceable. Granted, these songs aren't as impressive as some of the complicated themes found on the last album. But they're certainly welcome and easy to take, and any talk of selling out should be quieted by Stefani's improved songwriting. *Rock Steady* signifies continued evolution for a band that supposedly reached its peak with 1996's *Tragic Kingdom*. Although getting older, No Doubt is only getting better. And it can still make us dance. *The Arts & Entertainment Editor can be reached at artsdesk@unc.edu.*

# Wu-Tang Clan Experiences Resurrection; The Good Life Gets Too Complicated

Wu-Tang Clan  
Iron Flag  
★★★★☆

Although it feels like a lifetime ago, the Wu-Tang Clan first burst upon the scene with *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* just nine years ago. With its brash disregard for bouncy West Coast style and an imaginative reconstruction of New York City streets as the Shaolin they learned from old kung fu flicks, the Wu-Tang sound came to be, and hip hop was forever changed. After a sub par third album, *The W*, and a steady stream of brilliant solo albums from members such as Raekwon's *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx* and Ghostface Killah's *Supreme Clientele*, fans began to wonder if the Wu had fallen off. It hasn't. The Wu is back, and while it would be a stretch to say it's better than ever, the Wu definitely still have it. *Iron Flag* isn't going to fundamentally change hip hop, but it's one of the better albums of the past year. Most people have come to know what to expect from the Wu — some of the best lyricists around seamlessly exchanging the spotlight, vivid tales of living on the street and top-notch, gritty production. Whereas on previous Wu-Tang releases, the emcees carried the songs and the beats seemed to follow, on *Iron Flag*, RZA's beats often lead with the lyricists in tow. This is most evident some of the albums best tracks such as "Rules" and "Uzi (Pinky Ring)." Some of the weaker tracks on the album are the ones where the production recedes into the background and the emcees take the burden of driving. Sometimes it works, as in "Chrome Wheels;" other times it doesn't. The album's finale, "Dashing (Reasons)" is a redundant bore that begs for some comic relief from Ol' Dirty Bastard. Unfortunately, O.D.B. (a.k.a. Big Baby Jesus) is incarcerated and

could not join the group for the album. Sometimes, *Iron Flag* doesn't feel like a true Wu album because there's a distinct lack of the slurred, sociopathic ranting and raving that is his signature. O.D.B. (a.k.a. Joe Bananas), who was convinced that the American government was after him, might disagree with some of the verses in the album's best track, "Rules," which sounds positively patriotic — "Together we stand, divided we fall/Mr. Bush sit down, I'm in charge of the war!" Perhaps *Iron Flag* will change hip hop after all. *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* revolutionized East Coast, urban rap. Maybe *Iron Flag* will be the album that starts the patriotic hip-hop movement. Don't hold your breath though. *By Trafton Drew*

The Good Life  
*Black Out*  
★★★★☆

The Good Life had a recipe for an interesting band. Combine techno, well-written lyrics and talented musicians to make a diverse album. But the result is too potent. The album becomes inconsistent and busy, making it a difficult, overbearing effort. The Good Life has created a promising band, but its unintentional mimicry of The Cure is disappointing; if the band doesn't make it with its own material, it would be an amazing cover band performing *Boys Don't Cry* in its entirety. While lead singer Tim Kasher often recycles The Cure's style, his monotonous vocals on *Black Out*'s opening track stray from his usually uplifting lines. The song is meant to serve as a prelude

for the music to come but fails because most of the music has a different style. Departing completely from the opener, the second song, "Beaten Path," opens with heavy industrial rhythms and techno beats. The song soon turns into an upbeat dismissal of an ex but segues back into techno to come full circle. For added fun, the song has some great sing-along lyrics: "If you love it, you leave it/Cause you hate that you need it/It's one thing you can't have/You're too self-absorbed to change — always my way." While the album's 14 tracks are intelligent and well-written, they tend to be sample-ridden. The electronica and the regular songs would be incredible on their own but don't combine in a palatable way — they are too complicated. If you take the individual parts of the songs for what they are, the first half of the album is enjoyable; the album's second half takes a dive, with the only light being "Off the Beaten Path," where rather than celebrating and dismissing an ex, he laments over a relationship. This song works as a contradiction to

the carefree attitude in "Beaten Path." The fun lyrics of this song are reversed in "Off the Beaten Path," with Kasher singing of the time when he was "willing to make the commitment to rejection." There's no doubt The Good Life is talented, but its songs seem jumbled, and the mix of techno with the music and lyrics is too random and confusing. Separately great, but together they don't work. You either want to hear more of the band or more of the techno mixes but not more of both. The Good Life would lead a better life if they had kept it simple. *By Kristen Williams*

The Standard  
*August*  
★★★★☆

The hard work that went into The Standard's new album is obvious because they sound pretty exhausted. With its heavy electric guitars, as typical of metal music, The Standard adds electric keyboards and piano to its rocking exploits and give the music a dreamy, digital edge. Full of earnest feel-

ing, the band's second LP, *August*, reflects the labor and devotion that go into making music survive the test of time. *August* is a great leap forward from the band's self-titled debut in 1999, in which Tim Putnam's strained but emotive vocals added enough uniqueness to typical rock sound to gain an initial following in the Northwest. Despite its aims for originality, the band's use of heavy electric guitars and traditional drum beats on the first album landed it in the tired '90s post-grunge genre. With a little innovation and a lot of hard work, The Standard prevents history from repeating itself with *August*. The polished work of Jay Clarke and new addition Gail Buchanan on the keyboards and piano are essential to the band's development. Combined with Putnam's vocals, Clarke and Buchanan's efforts give the album an electronic sound that belongs to this band exclusively. While it's admirable that the band's sound reflects its hard work, all too often it speaks through languid guitar sequences that seem to drag on. "When Everything

Went North" is marked by a repeating downtrodden guitar riff that makes the music sound fatigued. Combined with Putnam's voice, the tired rhythms make the band sound like it's on its last leg. But variation helps keep the music alive. Laborious beats often develop into heavier and more defining guitar beats. In "Bells to the Boxer," Putnam gives gusto to opening lyrics of desperation by letting his voice develop and become more overtly passionate as the song progresses. The changes in tempo and emotiveness are smoothed over and completed by electronic keyboard sequences reminiscent of those on Mercury Rev's *Deserter's Songs*. The sequences make the album's strongest tracks, including "The Five-Factor Model" and "Behind the Screens," impressive by creating a web of digital sound. This makes for a unique background to the other instruments and leaves you feeling a little dreamy. And best of all, *August* obliterates any memory of the band's previous mediocrity. *By Caroline Lindsey*

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