

Ill Harmonics Unleash Christian Rap; Portable Vents

Ill Harmonics

Take Two
★★★★☆

The Christian rap duo Ill Harmonics varies the music on *Take Two*, its first album after its 2000 debut with *An Octave Above the Original*. Some songs boast car-shaking bass while others infuse Spanish guitar, maracas and trumpets, making for an atypical rap album.

The duo might be Christian rappers, but the songs don't shove God and Bible verses in your face. With a laid-back style, the band comments on faith and destiny and mentions God tactfully.

While the music behind the rhymes is inventive and fun, the lyrics often fall flat. Some of the defining characteristics of rap music — sex, drinking, drugs and fun — are, as to be expected, absent from the album. Most of the songs have a freestyle quality, and the lyrics seem pointless and don't branch out.

In fact, one lyric is laugh-out-loud funny — beginning a song with "Playdough's the name." Singing "Playdough" with a hard-core, serious delivery was pure comedy in itself. But compound this delivery with the fact that it's impossible to take a guy named Playdough seriously.

Outkast they're not, but the creativity exhibited by Ill Harmonics is reminiscent of the originality produced by the southern rappers. Tempo and style vary throughout the LP, making each song different.

And while these songs might use similar techniques, the duo occasionally infuses Spanish-tinged styles that sound as different from the purely American tracks as they do from each other; the rhythms of "Destiny" and "San Jose" both boast a Latin feeling, but each keeps its own individuality that sets it apart from more standard fare like "The Crowd is Standing."

"Destiny" showcases the album's other side, one infused with Spanish rhythms. The song is also more spiritual than other songs, eloquently expressing the duo's opinion that they were called by God to sing. Rapping "Speakin' parable not fable cause eternally the truth is the only thing that's stable/ A call that many have had but few have chosen," they touch on Christianity without forcing it upon the audience.

And like "The Crowd is Standing," the album's title track features a driving bass beat with superior lyrics, following the more traditional concept of rapping,

Behind the chorus of "Take two and mañana give a call, the questions asked and answered yes y'all/ A double dose, pill from the ill prescribed, your pharmacist to assist in catching the vibe," the music has catchy repetitions. But the random sound of a guy screaming along with a chain saw adds too much to the mix.

A purely instrumental album might have been even better than downplaying the music with less-than-stellar lyrics. It's easy to imagine more talented rappers doing the instrumentals justice and making great songs out of the inventive rhythms.

Although the sounds and a few lyrics are creative and refreshing, the majority of *Take Two* is inferior rapping with superior beats.

By Kristen Williams

Zoo Story

Come Out and Play
★★★★☆

Invite your friends because it is indeed time to *Come Out and Play* — play "name that influence."

As unoffensive as possible, this album is easy on the ears. But anything can be easy on the ears if you've heard it or something ridiculously similar to it enough already.

Opening with Creed-esque power chords and whining, lilting vocal stylings that lack only the sincerity of Counting Crows' Adam Duritz, Zoo Story sets a precedent that continues throughout *Come Out and Play*.

Perfectly mirroring the musical trends, pop-rock stars and one hit wonders of the past 15 years, this album might serve a better purpose than car music. You could potentially use it as a crash course for friends who have been living under a rock or out of the country since Counting Crows' *August and Everything After* hit the charts.

You could also use *Come Out and Play* for some serious nostalgia. "Chasing Zen" was melodically made to remember those late summer evenings in smoky concert halls when you were 16 years old, your arm around your best friend and a Schlitz in the other hand. Lighter anyone?

For folks who remember the early '90s, "Star" sounds like an unreleased track from U2's *The Joshua Tree*, hitting and missing all the way through. The track is a testament to the fact that these boys have forgotten the cardinal rule of becoming an international pop-rock star — give the people something new. No matter how hard you cling to the under-

belly of the bandwagon, you're still clinging to the underbelly of a bandwagon.

Not to say that *Come Out and Play* isn't without merit. Zoo Story executes its imitations well, managing to recreate the feel of the genuine articles without embarrassing themselves.

At its best, melodically and technically, the members take a hint from Radiohead's *The Bends*, Travis' *The Man Who* and the kind of destructive rock that surfaced on the soundtrack for "Empire Records." The track "If I Could Dream Like Francis" is evidence that if you're going to cheat off someone else's paper, it's always wise to turn your eyes toward the smarter kids in the class. While it might not have originality, one can't say that Zoo Story doesn't have taste.

This album is perfect for schooling those special exchange students who spent their adolescence listening to French rap. But be careful blithely applying tracks like "M" to just anyone you consider musically illiterate. Even people who think The The is just a typo will still be driven mad, shivering in the corner and repeating phrases like: "Oh God, who does that sound like? I know it, wait, hang on ..." over and over again.

Yet, there is hope for Zoo Story, and it lies in the track "((Intermission))." Irony is always a strong musical statement, and it's more than fitting that Zoo Story's redemption lies in its "((Intermission))." Part Renaissance madrigal and part acoustical moment of honesty, this short track holds the brightest ember of what could save Zoo Story from itself — itself.

See, Mom wasn't lying when she told you to "just be yourself and everyone will love you." But when you're trying to become an international pop-rock star, that's something else entirely. The timeless advice to "learn from your elders" followed by the showbiz credo "get your own gimmick," is ...

well ... timeless.

That's the thing about this album and, if you want to get technical, about life. You can shuffle by, taking hints from others and failing to keep your eyes on your own paper, but honestly, will you be able to deal with the result?
By Brooks Firth

Portable

Only if You Look Up
★★★★☆

Underneath that hard masculine facade, the pseudo-tough act Portable has plenty of feathered edges.

On *Only if You Look Up*, the band's sophomore LP, Portable asserts angry rock angst but doesn't quite manage to cover up its soft side.

In a conglomeration of guitars, bass and drums, the album starts with a bang. In track-long rounds of imitation, the four-piece band sometimes plays like a fluid blend of Fuel, recent Collective Soul and Our Lady Peace.

But Portable's emotionally volatile pump makes it not quite this and not quite that. The band might produce echoing chords of familiarity for the listener, but most often the album's sound is symptomatic of I-just-can't-place-it syndrome.

Yet clearly, Portable is rock. These boys can be tough, and they're not afraid to show it — the roughened rock boy image seems to be their musical ideal. At the same time, though, the band members demonstrate a penchant for letting tenderness seep through at the oddest moments.

Opening with the intensely building musicality of "Never Small," the album immediately demonstrates that Portable is tight. There's just the right amount of buildup to the vocals, which come in at the ideal crescendo. And the bridges, contrasting with the harsh, elaborate feel of the remainder of the tune, are musically muted to showcase vocalist Chance's striking crooning skills.

There is a notable fluidity to Portable's sound. Tracks flow into one another, producing a continuously invigorating album that is emotionally explosive.

Rhythmic rock ranting dominates "A Man Destroys," grinding out a sort of kiss-off that culminates in shouts, not singing. "Left" is almost painfully rock-filled and is the one track on the album that that could be considered overkill.

But these boys have the sweet, sad song style down as well. With "Given," Portable launches into a flawless melancholy melody that ebbs behind Chance's slightly whining words. The vocalist/musician opens with a simple piano melody, an anthem for his sensitive side, and the tune gives to a slightly sweet dusting of musical sugar.

"Come in From the Cold" exemplifies the nostalgic boy ballad. Similarly soft and introspective, "Suffocate," begins with lyrics like those on Nine Inch Nails' *The Fragile* and eerily Kornesque instrumentals. "If you can't breathe, then I can't breathe; let's suffocate together," Chance whispers.

And if you're doubting the existence of lovelorn sappy singing boys, just take a moment to listen to "Last Song," which proves Portable consists of puppies rather than pit bulls.

Only if You Look Up is a bit manic, drawing elements from various rock and alternative bands to form a familiar yet new sound. The band, chameleon-like, has managed to imitate some of the best facets of different rock acts without playing poser. Initially, Portable's style might seem mired in madness, but don't be fooled by the quartet's macho stance.

Underneath, they're just big softies.
By Michelle Jarboe

dive
recommends

By Michael Abernethy

■ **Kate Bush, *Hounds of Love***
Bush had Bjork, Tori Amos and the Lilith Fair crowd furiously taking notes when she released her 1985 masterpiece, *Hounds of Love*. The album is set into two distinct halves. Side one holds the best pop songs she ever penned ("Cloudbusting," "Running Up That Hill"). But it was the daring dream sequence of side two ("The Ninth Wave") that cemented the album's status as the best of the '80s had to offer.

■ **Annie Lennox, *Diva***
When The Eurythmics broke up in 1990, most critics believed that Dave Stewart was the brain behind the duo. But Lennox's 1992 solo debut silenced all who previously believed the passionate front-woman favored style over substance. Rarely, if ever, has anyone captured the double standards and painful realities of love so eloquently.

■ **"Labyrinth"** Jim Henson's musical comedy cast David Bowie next to future Oscar-winner Jennifer Connelly and a staggering number of huggable Muppets. This movie inspired my first crush (Connelly), my dog's name (Ludo, after the cuddly giant) and hours of fantasizing about the Muppets in my closet who were ready to take me to the goblin canteen.

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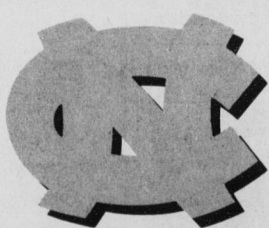
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