

Usher's new flick got it bad

BY HARRY KAPLOWITZ
STAFF WRITER

In his new movie, "In the Mix," R&B songster Usher flashes his abs a few times, does some dancing and kisses several beautiful women — pretty much what he does in his music videos.

And while the kind of self-serving charm he exudes is tolerable for the four or five minutes he appears on Total Request Live, it doesn't work on the big screen.

Maybe no one told Usher that "In the Mix" had to be an hour and a half longer than most of his videos. His attempt at leading-man status falls about as short as the majority of his lyrics.

"In the Mix" makes it hard to separate Usher the recording artist from Usher the actor — mainly because the two are relatively indistinguishable onscreen.

Playing Darrell Williams, a rising star in the Brooklyn DJ circuit, Usher emotes about as much charisma as a dull 2-year-old and his attempts at genuine acting are as flat as the film's formulaic plot.

After saving the life of a mob boss, Williams is recruited to play bodyguard to a Mafia princess, played by the forgettable-if-she-weren't-so-beautiful Emmanuelle Chriqui. Canoodling, pasta eating and speaking in hackneyed Mafia dialogue ensues, and "In the Mix"

ends with a cement-shoed thud.

While some singers-turned-theatersians such as Britney Spears and, most recently, 50 Cent can chalk up a bad movie to a trite script or a flawed film concept, Usher has no such luck. Earning himself an executive producer credit for "In the Mix," much of the weight of this dramatically burdensome flick falls on his nimble shoulders.

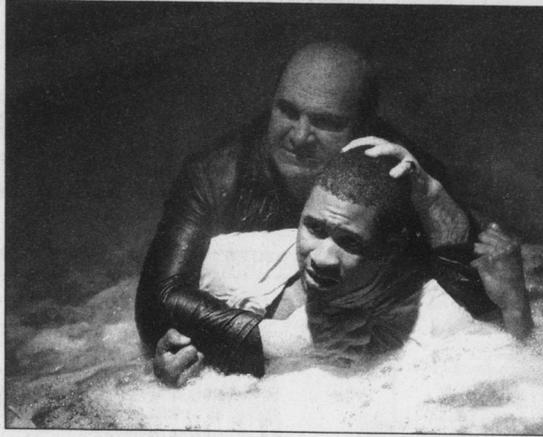
Marketed and clearly made to profit from Usher's stardom, "In the Mix" offers little, if anything, to the movie-going public. Wrought with racial stereotypes, a horrible story line and unforgivably bad acting, the piece is about as shameless in its intentions as a middle school bully.

If you were born before 1991, you're probably not the film's target demographic.

What makes Usher a successful commodity to the teenybopper sect is his ability to appear disarming: He's not rough around the edges like many members of his musical cohort who venture onto the big screen.

Shallow and predictable, "In the Mix" does as much to solidify Usher's movie career as *Big Willie Style* did to solidify Will Smith's rap career. The only difference is that *Big Willie Style* was sparsely enjoyable.

What else can you expect from



COURTESY OF LIONS GATE FILMS

Usher struggles to keep his head above water in his first attempt at a leading role in the mafia love story 'In the Mix.' DJs have it rough, too.

MOVIE REVIEW 'IN THE MIX'



director Ron Underwood, the man responsible for one of the biggest flops ever, 2002's "The Adventures of Pluto Nash"?

Right off the bat, "In the Mix" becomes a muddled mess that's more style than substance, lulling the viewer into a false sense of cine-

matic security. Before too long, the film sheds its sugary-sweet facade and becomes a running punch line within itself.

Ultimately, "In the Mix" sleeps with the fishes.

It proves once and for all that Usher should stick to MTV and duets with Lil' Jon, which is where he's best: in small doses.

Contact the A&E Editor at artsdesk@unc.edu.

'Dragon' offers an escape from boring music

BY JACKY BRAMMER
STAFF WRITER

Picture yourself as a music executive. How exactly does one sell '60s Cambodian pop crossed with Nuggets-esque psychedelics and dashed with a taste of Ethiopian jazz?

Simple — you don't. The music sells itself.

Blast Dengue Fever's *Escape from Dragon House* at high volume and watch as all existential conversations about the necessity of a riff here or a rest there evaporate into nothingness.

The music blatantly rocks too much to be pigeonholed into any stereotype or genre.

As the opening track, "We Were Gonna," gets cranking, about a million questions arise. Primary among them: Where did this music come from?

It can't be from this planet. Andrew Lloyd Webber couldn't compose those organ phrases if he were on mescaline and hooked up to a Long Island iced tea I. V.

The pitch and timbre of singer Chhom Nimol's seraphic vocals alone put the origin somewhere around the rings of Saturn.

Midway through the next track, "Sui Bong," the listener is convinced he has it figured out. Septic organs, otherworldly vocals and straightforward song compositions equal a fairly original album.

That is fine until the minute-and-a-half mark, when a sleazy alto saxophone straight out of film noir joins the array.

When seedy jazz is added to the equation, *Escape from Dragon House* is upgraded to a remarkably original album.

The picturesque, near-acoustic ballad, "Sleepwalking Through The Mekong," continues the tour de force, keeping the album squarely in the realm of excellence.

Then comes "One Thousand Tears of a Tarantula."

Suddenly, a wailing baritone sax creeps in like a bay-area foghorn.



MUSIC REVIEW DENGUE FEVER ESCAPE FROM DRAGON HOUSE



More and more horns join the fray as it starts to resemble a creation that would make free-jazz pioneer Cecil Taylor proud.

The song ends up a synth-pop masterpiece that perfectly balances melodic moaning with Nimol's insanity-induced chanting.

Those new revelations blow the formula to pieces, and what you are left with is undoubtedly a one-of-a-kind album.

Sure, there are overtones of early Doors in some of the instrumentation on the LP, including cascading organs and sharp guitars. Sure, Echo & the Bunnymen would have something to say about anyone playing neo-psychedelic rock.

But let's face it: Music is a melting pot. When was the last time anyone created anything entirely original? Mozart?

Dengue Fever's first album was an homage to its influences in the form of a collection of Cambodian pop covers.

On the sophomore album, the band branches out into brave new territory.

For Dengue Fever, the future is looking bright and could well eclipse its already renowned past.

Contact the A&E Editor at artsdesk@unc.edu.

Shinoda's rap album a minor disaster

Linkin Park MC botches solo debut

BY ANDREW CHAN
STAFF WRITER

At its best, hip-hop continues the tradition of what used to be called "race music." Like soul and jazz, the genre often is demonized for its visceral reflection of current identity politics.

Though it began in America's inner city, it has attracted affluent white audiences for years, and middle-class perspectives are becoming increasingly common.

It's a strange transition, because the tough aesthetic of the game always was in reaction to oppression and hopelessness.

Linkin Park's emcee Mike Shinoda was not born into the working class and, as the only commercially successful Asian American on the rap scene, it makes sense that he doesn't know

his place in its black vs. white, gangsta vs. suburban equation.

On his first solo album, *The Rising Tied*, he strives to be morally and ethnically conscious. Lyrics about the internment of Japanese Americans and the misogyny of popular hip-hop try to win him the credibility he lacks on the surface.

But the most important quality he's missing is skill.

What's been obvious since his first records with Linkin Park are the awkwardness of his rhymes and the almost painful uncertainty of his flow.

Released under the pseudonym Fort Minor, this album finds Shinoda free from the insufferable vocal adornment of bandmate Chester Bennington and under the wing of executive producer Jay-Z. Mainly because his range is no

longer being limited to rap-metal's adolescent whining, Shinoda's lyrics have improved marginally.

They are still forced and hackneyed, especially when they try to get the party started ("In Stereo") or prove a point about human interconnectedness ("Right Now").

But self-pity is unfashionable in hip-hop and no longer seems to be this rapper's primary interest.

His most notable achievement here is as a producer, incorporating tuneful piano melodies with serviceable beats.

Nevertheless, despite some charisma, Shinoda never gets his songs off the ground when he is at the mic. In collaborations with Black Thought and Common, he manages to slide by on likability but ends up having nothing to say with his unthreatening, boyish persona.

The album is so innocuous that it feels silly to think about it as an expansion of rap's style and subject

MUSIC REVIEW FORT MINOR THE RISING TIED



matter (something you might be able to say about the work of back-packer Kanye West).

Rappers, even at their most buoyant, used to perform as if they were vessels of pain and anger, but blandness such as this is not unusual in hip-hop today.

In the end, *The Rising Tied* doesn't add to the genre's stock dramas so much as replace them with toothless generalities.

Contact the A&E Editor at artsdesk@unc.edu.

THE Daily Crossword

By Alan P. Olschwang

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- ACROSS**
- Soup veggie
 - Boxer Roberto
 - Plant pore
 - Coffee server
 - Juarez January
 - Loudness units
 - Sch. near Harvard
 - Start of William Blake quote
 - Director Kurosawa
 - For two, in music
 - Robert Pirsig book
 - Proofreader's mark
 - Smiled derisively
 - Part 2 of quote
 - Host of Parisians?
 - Actress Scalia
 - Nuclear sub
 - Shaq of the NBA
 - Shade tree
 - Nappy leather
 - Members of a Jamaican religious sect
 - Lacking brightness
 - Speaker of baseball
 - Part 3 of quote
 - Upholstery fabric
 - Stated
 - Part of U.A.R.
 - Greek letter
 - Pigs' pads
 - End of quote
 - Hail to Horace
 - Drink garnish

- DOWN**
- Mountain lion
 - Satie or Estrada
 - Counteractive substances
 - Alaska park
 - One in Toledo
 - McEntire sitcom
 - Saharan
 - Take your time
 - Sound of a leak
 - "A Confederacy of Dunces" author
 - Studio sign
 - Actress Oberon
 - Syrian leader
 - Star in Cygnus

21 Prepare leftovers

25 Type of roll

27 Son of Seth

28 God of thunder

29 One Chaplin

30 Hop to it!

31 Ralph _ Emerson

35 Think better

36 Longitude lines

37 Refine rhetoric

38 Hebrew letter

40 Cohort of Haley and Bolger

42 Actress Farrow

45 Usher

47 El Norte Sra.

50 Put on cargo

51 Gives lip to

52 Sierra Nevada lake

53 Seed covers

54 Foundation

55 Over

59 Grow weary

60 Dancer Pavlova

62 Depraved

63 Physically provocative

65 Unseid of the NBA

66 Tonic's partner

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