

Brit rockers wish upon 'Stars' Latest Lee joint a box-office gem

Pond-hoppers: the next big thing?

BY ORR SHTUHL
STAFF WRITER

Hard-Fi is the new Killers. Before you fire up your hype machines, consider this: The Killers are nothing special. But mediocrity is not what these two bands share. Rather, *Stars of CCTV* — like *Hot Fuss* — is a punchy pop album with more hits than B-sides and nary a weak song in sight. Since its U.K. release last summer, the band's debut album has peaked at No. 1 on the British charts and includes four Top-20 singles. Of course, commercial success is no substitute for quality. But *Stars* is the real deal.

Even at first listen, the record's opening six tracks emerge as obvious singles. *Hot Fuss* is hamstrung by lifeless vocals and a persistent new-wave sheen. But in six songs Hard-Fi wears as many styles, keeping things dynamic and interesting. "Cash Machine," the album's lead track and breakthrough hit, has a slithering Mediterranean sound that contrasts with the fast rock of its follow-up, "Middle Eastern Holiday." "Tied Up Too Tight" stomps along with dramatic strings. "Gotta Reason" follows with an up-tempo shot of taurine — forget caffeine — in the vein of the Caesars'

"Jerk It Out" or even the Swingin' Medallions' "Double Shot (Of My Baby's Love)." (Look it up, you'll know it). Then comes the sexy ABBA-style disco of "Hard to Beat," soaked in trombone a la "Dragnet." Piano ballad "Move on Now" follows, resurrecting the feel of The Verve's "Sonnet" while giving listeners a breather. And the album's hardly half over. Hard-Fi does fall prey to the missteps of most chart-topping Brit rock. Lyrics fall short of memorable, especially when addressing politics on "Middle Eastern Holiday." But while The Killers and peers stick to themes of dance-club love,

MUSICREVIEW
HARD-FI
STARS OF CCTV
★★★★

Hard-Fi has a distinct working-class perspective. Songs like "Feltham Is Singing Out," which is about a friend turning to robbery to get out of debt, give a bottom-up view of the South England streets. The coherence of the record's attitude provides a base for 11 potential hits, each one excelling in a different direction. For those with a penchant for CD singles, *Stars of CCTV* would be a worthy investment.

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BY WILLIAM FONVIELLE
STAFF WRITER

Spike Lee's "Inside Man" is the kind of movie that quote whores dream about. You know what a quote whore is — someone from a no-name media outlet such as KGNU-FM in Boulder, Colo., who, typically in exchange for a gift bag from the studio, supplies a juicy quote for the newspaper and TV ads. And with "Inside Man," the possibilities are endless. "Spike Lee's best film in a decade." "Denzel Washington oozes movie-star cool." "A taut, edge-of-your-seat thriller that crackles with wit and intelligence."

MOVIEREVIEW
'INSIDE MAN'
★★★★

Shameless? You betcha. But what makes the situation so damning is that such lines are actually true. At one point in the movie a character says, to paraphrase, "You've seen 'Dog Day Afternoon.' You know how this is gonna end." Indeed, writer Russell Gewirtz, on a remarkably confident first screenplay, knows our expectations for a heist movie and plays to them, producing a story that, although not as much about character as it is plot, at least puts both in the same ballpark. For the audience, that provides a vantage into the action, and although the story doesn't demand you to be an active participant, you aren't encouraged to simply sit back and watch everything unfold in front of you either. Clive Owen, shielded behind a mask for a large chunk of the running time, serves as the mastermind behind what he calls "the perfect bank robbery," with Washington playing one of two police negotiators and an atypically snide Jodie Foster as an extra hand brought in to protect the secret interests of bank owner Christopher Plummer. You know you've got a crackerjack cast when an appearance by Willem Dafoe as an aggressive captain barely warrants a mention. The words "Spike Lee joint" are typically a signal for gung-ho message pictures, films that are intelligent and thoughtful but don't

exactly stun you with their editing and camera work. That direct a mainstream Hollywood thriller a surprising choice for Lee, being the sort for whom style over substance is generally considered blasphemous. Lee proves himself to be quite the adept genre director, though, steering his ship with such an unflagging pace that its plot holes don't even become apparent until you walk back through the parking lot. Who knows — maybe he hopped on this project purely for the money. But regardless of the underlying motivation, he hasn't had this much fun behind the camera in ages. This is a tight, sharp narrative that exhibits none of the earmarks of his recent overstuffed endeavors. There's a distinct difference between selling out and going mainstream, however, and Lee still retains some elements that mark his filmography while making them accessible to a wider audience. Searing elements of racial tension, corrupt politics and power struggles are bubbling just underneath the surface, but Lee is in complete command of his craft, and he never allows this to overshadow his heist story. Critic Emanuel Levy made the comparison to David Cronenberg's "A History of Violence," and that seems about right. The ability to appeal to the masses without losing what makes you unique should be considered artistic growth, not a cop-out. No, "Inside Man" marks new and exciting ground for Spike Lee, a fresh playing field that he should feel unashamed to bat on. And for those studio folks who care (read: no one), that's The Daily Tar Heel, four words.

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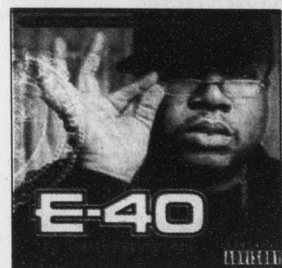
Washed-up rapper nets failing marks

California crunk attack gets stupid

BY SAM NEED
STAFF WRITER

Detention is in order for hip-hop veteran E-40, who at the very least deserves academic probation for his most recent album, *My Ghetto Report Card*. A West Coast mainstay notable for inventing the "izzle" popularized by Snoop Dogg, E-40 is a respected veteran with a flair for inventive linguistics. That's what makes this spectacular failure so surprising. From embarrassingly immature lyrics to beats that sound like they were ripped from a Nintendo 64 to a sluggish flow stumbling on overly active tracks, *My Ghetto Report Card* leaves no potential for cacophony unused. Worse still, it highlights all of the forces within mainstream hip hop that continue to marginalize and alienate the genre on the national stage. The album goes from inauthentic gangster lyrics to unnecessary misogyny to tired beats you could have sworn you heard yesterday on someone else's track. *My Ghetto Report Card* reads less like a report card and more like an ominous status report of all of the things that need to change

if hip hop is to regain its former relevance. While a vibrant underground hip-hop scene never fails to pulse with dynamic energy, albums like this from hip-hop "veterans" fail to live up to the promise of the genre. Instead of Atmosphere or Little Brother, E-40 gets pushed as a representative of the craft, and with tracks such as "Gimmie Head," expect more than one potential fan to be turned off. E-40 is pushing 40 years of age, but his lyrics make him sound like insecure and young. Songs such as "Muscle Cars" would be more appropriate in a Hot Wheels commercial than a hip-hop album, while tracks such as "I'm da Man" bring into question E-40's self-confidence. He does make an attempt at a song with a conscience, but it comes too little too late. After 19 tracks that could have been written by a pubescent 12-year-old, E-40 finally attempts some critical thinking with "Happy to Be Here," but by the time it arrives, it rings completely false. What's worse, on the immature tracks that make up the bulk of the album, E-40's flow is horrendous.



MUSICREVIEW
E-40
MY GHETTO REPORT CARD
★

the artists haven't studied enough to pass the test. And it couldn't be worse, right? Unfortunately, this review hasn't yet touched on the beats, mind-numbingly terrible efforts with about as much crunk as a bottle of Smirnoff Ice. The production value is street-level at best — tracks intended to bump trunks instead sound like they were recorded in trunks. E-40's first single, "Tell Me When to Go," sounds like it samples "Donkey Kong," while tracks like "Go Hard or Go Home" would be more appropriate as accompaniments to "The Electric Slide." The only good beat on the album, "U And Dat," sounds uncannily like Usher, but Usher's name is nowhere to be found on the album. It's emblematic of the album as a whole that the only pleasurable sound on it would be unfaithfully stolen from another artist. E-40 gets straight F's.

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