

Play Time

Dime-novel songs punctuated by 50-point words on \$20 DVD By Jesse Jarnow

THE DECEMBERISTS

A Practical Handbook

[KILL ROCK STARS] ★★★½

The Decemberists' evocation of an elementary-school play—first on the cover art to 2005's *Picaresque*, and now as the overriding theme of their *Practical Handbook* DVD—is at least as strategic as it is whimsical. An arty conceit, for sure, it also allows them a starting point of both shambolic modesty and unabashed cutesiness. Both serve as something to transcend as well as a shield for frontman Colin Meloy's grand ambitions. If the lat-

ter fail, as they sometimes do—hey, it still comes off as innocent. But if they succeed, as they do far more often, it's a pretty good concept for a band.

During the frustratingly un-indexed live set leading off the DVD, this conceit plays both roles. Taped in its native Portland, the band takes to the stage in vague period-dress, Meloy in a candy-striped music-hall blazer, bassist Nate Query in bowler cap and suit, etc. From there, it's up to Meloy's songs. When the music matches his lyrics (such as with the charging Victorian bolero that sustains staggering rhymes like "pachy-

derm"/"passenger'd" on "The Infanta"), the costumes are legit, and The Decemberists' music is straight steam-punk thrill. Elsewhere, like on the pedestrian folk-rock strum of "We Both Go Down Together" and the precious "I Was Meant For the Stage," Meloy's quaint phrasings make the costumes seem downright corny. (Though the band's supremely mannered stage-trashing is also kind of charming.)

The real treasure, though, where The Decemberists transform into something beyond fuzzy post-indie darlings, comes with their quintet of music videos. In each case, Meloy's narratives act in delicately tangential concert with the visuals. The centerpiece is Andy Smetanka's stunning shadowplay animation for "The Tain," originally an 18-minute EP suite that, not coincidentally, remains the band's greatest artistic achievement yet. Smetanka's setting for the Duchamp-influenced "Bachelor and the Bride" is sublime, too, pulling a haunting thread like a tendril of the song's subconscious. Also of note is the lo-fi Michel Gondry-like time lapse of Nathaniel Freeman's "Here I Dreamt I Was An Architect."

As for its title function as a practical handbook, the DVD serves admirably, showcasing all sides of the band. Live, there are early, understat-

ed fantasies like "Leslie Anne Levine" (haunting, and simply so) and, later, overstated fantasies like "The Mariner's Revenge Song" (which entails stage props and audience participation). And to contrast the performance, there is a pleasant enough documentary, Aaron Stewart-Ahn's *Paris Before the War*, which chronicles the recording of *Picaresque* without probing too deeply into the band's music.

If there is a tension in The Decemberists' existence, it is one between being literate and literary. Most often, the band seems satisfied with the former, and that's a fine decision. Rock 'n' roll—even earnest, well-read rock 'n' roll—isn't necessarily meant to be anything but ecstatic. Attempting to do otherwise—that's a challenge. When The Decemberists meet it, they are utterly exhilarating. When they don't, you just applaud and smile, like at every other school play you've ever attended.



L-R: Jenny Conlee, Chris Funk, Colin Meloy, John Moen, Nate Query

— JESSE JARNOW —

Jesse Jarnow has written for the *London Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *Salon.com*, the *Associated Press* and many others. He blogs about B-sides, books and baseball at JesseJarnow.com, and occasionally writes fiction.

NICK CAVE & THE BAD SEEDS

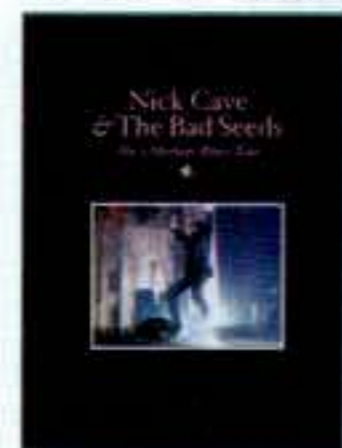
The Abattoir Blues Tour

[MUTE] ★★★★★

Nick the Dark Vicar takes his gothic sermons to the masses

There aren't many artists capable of releasing a career-defining work 13 albums into the game, but Aussie goth king Nick Cave is one such exception. In 2004, Bad Seeds co-founder Blixa Bargeld threw in his lot with *Einstürzende Neubauten* full time. The band's subsequent album—*Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus*—was its first studio double recording and marked the high-water point of Cave's post-Birthday Party output. The supporting tour never made it to the U.S., which is part of what makes *The Abattoir Blues Tour* such

a vital document, comprising two CDs of live material culled from various European dates and two DVDs capturing the tour's most fiery evenings (including a sold-out performance at London's Brixton Academy). And while the now- requisite rendition of



Cave live favorite "The Mercy Seat" goes missing, the set does include a near-complete performance of both studio discs (replete with backing from the London Community Gospel Choir) and Cave at his vicar-strength best, preaching almighty fire and brimstone while fearlessly cataloguing the darkest depths of human depravity. *Bud Scoppa*

U2

Achtung Baby: A Classic Album Under Review

[SEXY INTELLECTUAL] ★★★

U2's landmark 1991 release analyzed song-by-song

Falling at the midpoint of the band's career and arriving at the moment when it was most in need of reinvention, U2 may never make another album as pivotal as *Achtung Baby*. At least that's the premise proposed by the series of journalists interviewed for this 68-minute documentary, and they make an undeniably solid case by establishing the unique historical con-



text that produced what remains the band's most experimental release. Its relocation to Berlin, its flirtations with European dance music, its newfound willingness to explore the shades of grey surrounding love and faith—all of these are explored exhaustively to establish the idea that the album is the band's most complex and nuanced release. Even so, the lack of interview footage with any of the band members and the almost exclusive reliance on live and video footage causes the tone of the film to wax overly academic at times. It's likely that most U2 fanatics will know most of the points being discussed anyway, but for the neophyte, it's hard to find a better introduction to one of the definitive releases of the '90s. *Matt Fink*