

ROCKY VOTOLATO

THE BRAG AND CUSS [BARSUK]

[Fans of Owen, Damien Jurado, and Ryan Adams take note.]



The Brag and Cuss differs greatly in scope from 2006's *Makers*. While *Makers* was stripped down, *The Brag and Cuss* employs a full band behind Votolato, courtesy of James McAllister (Sufjan Stevens) on drums, Bill Herzog (Jesse Sykes & The Sweet Hereafter) on bass, Ricky Steff (Cat Power, Hank Williams, Jr.) on Hammond B3, piano and accordion, and Casey Foubert (Pedro the Lion) as utility-man and co-producer. But all these extra hands on deck do nothing to add authenticity to a sound that Votolato has yet to make his own. Simply put, this just sounds way too clean – way too polished for the style he is looking to implement. Don't get me wrong, Votolato hits his stride with "Time Is a Debt," which is harmonica-free, by the way. While still country-tinged, it chugs along like a beat-up pickup truck, thanks to an inimitably warm guitar hook. "Silver Trees," the closer, is the real eye-opener, in part because of the artist it recalls (cough, *Sufjan*, cough) as opposed to who is actually performing it. There's no question that Votolato is pleasant to listen to. He always is. The problem is that *The Brag and Cuss* is ultimately forgettable.

-D.J. Short



THE WINTER SOUNDS

PORCELAIN EMPIRE [LIVEWIRE]

[Sounds like the Byrds' "Eight Miles High" meets OMD's "So in Love" meets the Cure's *Standing on a Beach* meets Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible*.]



Sweet, bittersweet, and swishy in a synth-poppy, country fashion, the *Winter Sounds* and its principal songwriter, singer/bassist Patrick Keenan, take to the skies with layers of merry melancholy that don't leave an ugly aftertaste.

Big lilting melodies with subtly complex chord changes and spunky plunking sounds? Check. The glomming together of alterna-rock's new usual – the literal whistles, bells, and wood blocks? Check. The swoop and whirr of a million sea breezes that sound neatly noir-ish on tunes like "Windy City Nights" and "Poor Sailors"? Check. Smarmy yet romantic lyrics that run the gamut from badly bruised to abusive? Yes, yes, y'all. A girl keyboard player? Why of course. This band has it all. Sometimes too self-consciously so. But so what? A cluttered kitchen sink with too many dishes rarely sounds this pretty. Take it.

-A.D. Amorosi



THE FLAMING LIPS

U.F.O.'S AT THE ZOO DVD [WARNER BROS.]

Cynics decry the Flaming Lips spectacle as Raffi for grown-ups, and while the Lips are like boys with major-label toys, watching *U.F.O.'s At the Zoo* makes it pretty clear that the live fun-fest is a sincere endeavor by the band to give the fans an ecstatic show, the likes of which one doesn't see every day.

And when the crowd comes already dressed as space penguins and assorted oddities, it's already half way to delirious before the first roadie (who happens to be wearing a Captain America outfit) appears to flip on the first amp. Coming out of a giant space ship to start the show is the only way the band could get noticed with all the gleeful what-have-you going on in the Oklahoma City audience.

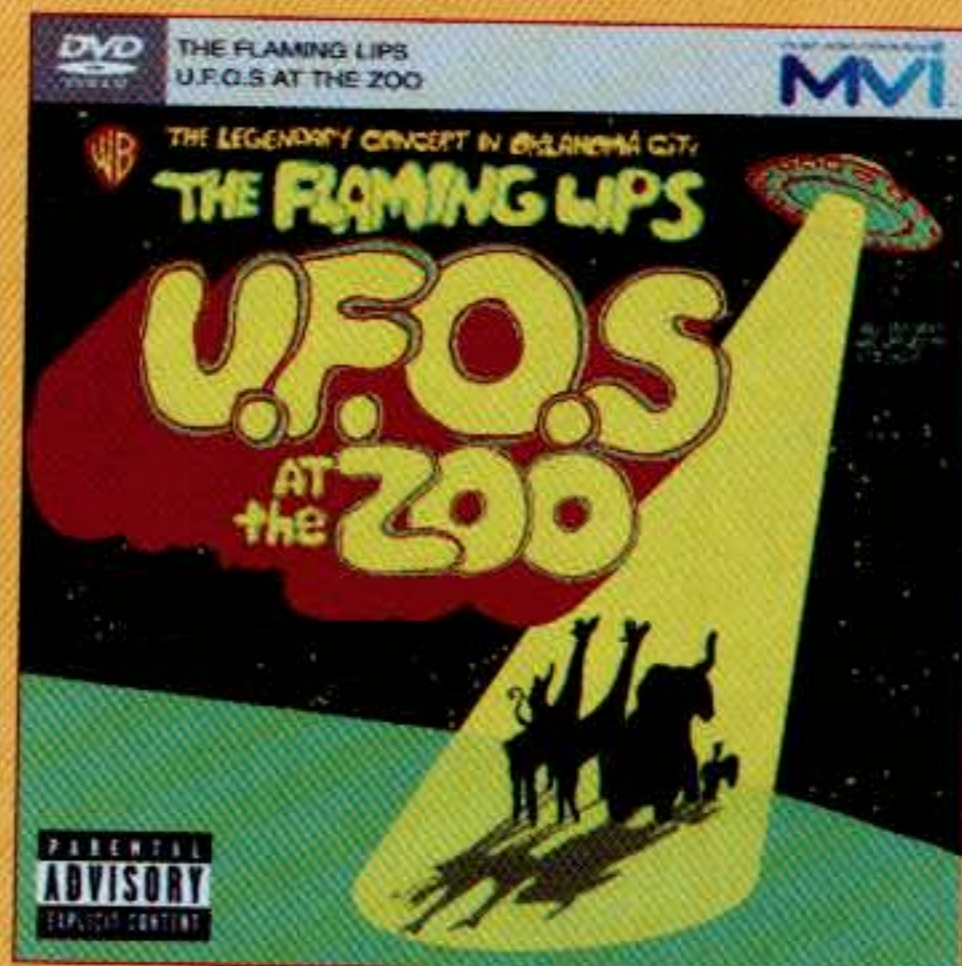
The fans are half the spectacle. Short asides between songs give screen time to costumed and zonked people alike who glow with delight and speak of Lips frontman Wayne Coyne as if he were Santa with a great drummer behind him (the guy playing Steve Drozd's beats rocks the kit throughout).

The Lips play close together on a big stage jumping with aliens, hand-held fog machines, and more confetti than Vegas on New Year's. As if that weren't enough, much of the footage is shot from the up-Wayne's-nose camera angle.

This is a good record of a band at one of its strange peaks. Longtime fans will maybe wish for more pre-*Soft Bulletin* tunes. We'll have to make do with "She Don't Use Jelly" and "Love Yer Brain," which is fine until you remember how good the track "Christmas At the Zoo" is, and why wouldn't the band play that song when performing at the Zoo Amphitheater and including footage of Coyne getting a smooch from a seal?

Still, this is a good time.

-Michael Coyle



THE JESUS LIZARD

THE JESUS LIZARD LIVE DVD [MVD]

What's left to say about the Jesus Lizard? We all know the band possessed one of the greatest rhythm sections ever. We also know that guitarist Duane Denison played the tastiest and most tasteful licks imaginable. And finally, we all know that frontman David Yow single-handedly reinvented the term "frontman" by twisting an art form Iggy Pop had mastered years before into an unrecognizable and uncanny means of expression.

Or, to put it simply, this group was definitely one for the record books.

This newly released live DVD captures all those unique qualities that made this band, up close and personal. Recorded on October 4, 1994 at the Venus De Milo Club in Boston, this video documents the Jesus Lizard live experience simply and honestly, focusing on the specific personalities and idiosyncrasies of each individual band member while also capturing the group's greatness as a whole. Shot with only two cameras, one on stage and one in the back of the club, the filmmaker avoids the usual video cliché of fast cutting between a multitude of angles and relies on the content before him to hold the viewer's interest. Luckily, that content comes in the form of a band that rocks quirky, offbeat songs with odd timings, odd lyrics, and funny titles.

Each group member is the star of this video in his own distinct way, but Yow, doing what he does best, comes across as the true ringleader of this musical insanity. His hoots and howls, as well as his upside-down handstands on top of the crowd, are what make this performance so incredibly entertaining. He drives the entire show home with the antics of a mischievously clever child and also with some of the weirdest shaped body movements imaginable.

-Kevin Egan

