

THE COURIER-GAZETTE

Shawn Mullins: Live at the Varsity Playhouse (MVD Visual DVD, 75 min.). Filmed in Atlanta, Ga., the show starts intimately, with Mullins solo for the first six songs, changing guitar for each number. The concert opens nicely with the story-song "Twin Rocks, Oregon." Then, he performs three new songs: "Home," the somewhat protest song "For America" (he says it didn't start as a protest song, but it has more umph and is about the terrible price U.S. soldiers have paid in Iraq) and "Fraction of a Man" (about a traveling salesman).

For the remainder of the show -- nine songs -- songwriter Mullins is joined by a five-piece band, including Peter Stroud on electric guitar (he helps drive the wonderful finale, "All in My Head," which also features Atlanta's Francine Reed on backing vocals). The band includes keyboards and one member who plays pedal steel and banjo. The rocking "Shimmer" opens the band portion in excellent fashion and has a fine chorus. Then comes the road song "Anchored in You" (accentuating the pedal steel guitar) and his hit, "Beautiful Wreck" (the music video of the song is included as a bonus feature). The murder mystery song "Cold Black Heart," another highlight, is followed by the new song "The Ballad of Kathryn Johnston" and an excellent cover of "The House of the Rising Sun." The encore is strong as well, featuring "Lullaby" and the aforementioned "All in My Head." The sound is 2-channel stereo or 5.1 surround, which puts the audience on the rear speakers. The other bonus features are a slide show and a 13-minute interview with Mullins discussing his career. **Grade: A**

By Tom Von Malder