

Masters of 'The Far Side' 'Come Poop With Me' keeps it real



Twentieth Century Fox
Russell Crowe keeps a firm grasp on his spyglass as he barks orders at his "Master and Commander" crew.

review by Daniel J. Stasiewski
a&e editor

"Master and Commander" isn't an action epic. If it were the explosive naval combat film the trailers promised, it would have starred Mel Gibson instead of Russell Crowe. No, "Master and Commander" is an intricate period drama, a history lesson. And with Crowe as the star, it's a detailed character study, the kind that only director Peter Weir can deliver.

Take the opening scenes for example. The camera makes the pans over historical details of Capt. Jack Aubrey's (Crowe) ship in the general period piece fashion (this film being of the Napoleonic era). There are close-ups on the names of the cannons and as the film progresses we get an idea of the ranking of seamen on the HMS Surprise.

On deck, an indecisive older midshipman and adolescent midshipman, peer into deep fog, on the hunt for the French privateer Archeron. The older one sees something for a moment, and unsure of how to react, he turns to the other midshipman, who makes the call. Moments later Capt. Aubrey marches to the deck and peers through the spyglass, a statuesque vision of power and nobility. Then the cannons begin to fire.

A surprise attack from the Archeron wounds the ship and

Aubrey's pride. The crew, however, steadfastly remains at its captain's side. Here Aubrey doesn't ever come off as directly arrogant, nor is he near humble. After all he chases down a ship that is the most modern of its kind, packing two times the firepower and boasting a sleeker design than that of the Surprise. Still, Aubrey is as torn apart internally about his decisions that end in tragedy, as well as externally by clashing with his friend and the ship's surgeon, Dr. Stephen Maturin (Paul Bettany).

Maturin is a naturalist, an intellectual, and most of all a person who doesn't fit well with the roughneck sailors. He's not an odd man out, except by his own will, but he is the only person on the ship who sees his friend's pride jumbling his judgment. Maturin is just as torn as Aubrey, but between friendship and subordination.

My first reaction was to compare this film to "Titanic" because of its sweeping technical precision. Then I remembered I didn't much like "Titanic," a terrible story with mediocre characters. As I thought about the film, its subtle character maneuvers and meticulous design reminded me more of "Barry Lyndon." "Master and Commander" is a period drama, the kind that Stanley Kubrick would have created.

There's a scene where Jack Aubrey takes night watch after duping the Archeron into following a decoy. I don't remember if he had a smile on his face or not, but I don't want his to have one, not even the slightest twinge. Aubrey isn't a character who flaunts his victories; he lets his crew do it for him.

And Crowe is the perfect actor for such a character. Like in "Gladiator," Crowe plays a man who would be just another action hero if played by most actors. Crowe can pull off a scene as a drunken naval officer and hide in the comedy a lack of humility. Maybe Aubrey was more arrogant than I saw in one sitting, but Crowe doesn't let the egotism completely take over the character so as to set him up for some miraculous change of heart. Instead, Crowe makes me admire the man and accept his flaws because people generally hide their arrogance as he does Aubrey's.

Opposite Crowe is Bettany, who manages to keep up with Crowe's performance stroke for stroke. As Maturin, Bettany provides the necessary counter to Crowe's Aubrey. He's a humble man of science, who was it not for actually picking up a sword during the finale, I would have branded a pacifist. I liked Bettany's character the immediacy of his passion, but loved him for his intimacy.

"Master and Commander" isn't a film that can be appreciated fully in a single viewing. As I write this, I feel I've missed details that will come with inevitable sittings in the future. But that is what's so beautiful about this film. It left me hungry, not for a sequel necessarily, but for more of the period, more of the style, and above all else, more of the characters I can't get out of my head.



"Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World," directed by Peter Weir and starring Russell Crowe and Paul Bettany, is currently showing at Tinseltown and the West Erie Plaza Cinemas.

Pearl Jam rediscovers gems on 'Lost Dogs'

review by Greg Smith
contributing writer

It's hard to think of a band that gives back to its fans as much as Pearl Jam. The veterans of grungy, politically charged, full-on rock care about their listeners, and it shows. The band's Ten Club offers newsletters, an annual Christmas-time 45 (that's a record, kids, you play it with a needle!), and priority ticketing. Pearl Jam has also released every show from their last two tours on CD, so any fan can have a keepsake of his or her concert, and the diehards can have the whole tour!

Well, the band has once again outdone itself, with the release of its widely anticipated two-disc set, "Lost Dogs," which contains 30 rarities and B-sides, 14 of which have never been released in any form. "Lost Dogs" is a diehard's dream come true, packed with tunes from the "How did this not make the album?" to the "this is just plain weird."

Though "Dogs" is a very diverse collection, not to mention career spanning, both the discs flow pretty nicely for a compilation-style record. Disc One launches off with the rocker "All Night" and outspoken vocalist Eddie Vedder's layered vocal tracks. The B-side, "Down," is an excellent yet simple track that was only left off of the "Riot Act" album because it didn't fit the flow, but its happy, melodic guitars fit just fine on "Dogs." The hard-hitting tune "Don't Gimme No Lip" is a bit of the obscure, but its raunchy guitar and short, simple lyrics from guitarist Stone Gossard will get you fired up for sure (Gossard sings only a couple PJ tunes, but is a fan-favorite at concerts, inspiring chants of "Let Stone Sing!"). "Leavin' Here" is an awesome rocker about women's rights that combines 50s song structure with Pearl Jam's punk flavor.

In a sharp contrast to the first disc's soaring, fast-paced style, Disc Two is a much mellower and flowing collection as a whole, opening with the entire album's

finest track, "Fatal." A B-side from "Binaural" and written by Gossard, "Fatal" shows Pearl Jam's diversity with its careful intro and flowing chorus. "Other Side" is another fantastic tune, written by bassist Jeff Ament. The odd sound, harmonized chorus and beautiful lyrics (Your absence is what breeds this fear/Warm breath and all it steals) make you long for loved ones as you listen. "Footsteps," a B-side from the "Jeremy" single from the "Ten" days, is a dark and haunting song about depression and suffering. Featuring only Gossard on acoustic guitar and Vedder on vocals, it will give you chills. "Wash" and "Brother" are both from the "Ten" era, and stray from the second disc's easy feeling. "Wash" closes to a raucous ending, while "Brother" is an instrumental track heavy on guitar, featuring the superhuman solo work of guitarist Mike McCready.

"Lost Dogs" features something for everyone, with tracks like 1998's radio hit "Last Kiss," which helped to raise \$10 million for Kosovo relief through sales of singles. "Dogs" also contains the epic "Yellow Ledbetter," another B-side from the now-legendary "Jeremy" single. "I still don't know what it's about and I don't want to!" explains McCready, of the song. "I love it! And fans like it too!"

The popular songs are nice for casual fans, but it's the obscurities like "Sweet Lew" and "Whale Song" that make "Lost Dogs" a rediscovered masterpiece. "Dogs" is full of musical gems, and the packaging is great as well. It contains a nice insert listing songwriting credits, release info, and one or two band members' comments for every track.

As if "Dogs" wasn't enough, the band has released another trinket for all the Jammers out there, a double DVD called "Live At The Garden." Recorded on July 8 at New York's Madison Square Garden, "LATG" features the band nearing the end of the Riot Act Tour. The DVD is also a great package for PJ fans as it features a set list that spans the Pearl Jam catalogue

as well as some great covers and special guests.

The DVD starts off with the band ripping into the "Riot Act" tune "Love Boat Captain," which starts slow but leaves you breathless by the end. Pearl Jam shows it can still rock with numbers like "Save You" and the early smash "Even Flow," which spotlights McCready laying some amazing solos on the NYC fans. The band cools it down from time to time, breaking out tunes like the lovely "Low Light" and the heartfelt desperation of "Thumbing My Way." Special guest Ben Harper is featured on a jammed-out version of "Daughter" as well as the low-key "Indifference." PJ also pulls off some nice covers of John Lennon's political tune "Give Me Some Truth" and the Who's "Baba O'Riley." The band closes the show in interesting fashion: with the house lights on, revealing the thousands of fans screaming as the bands rolls through a somber "Ledbetter." Although the "LATG" performance wasn't the band's best, PJ still has great energy and show that it goes all out every night on stage.

At first, I wasn't thrilled with the way the DVD was shot, but it grew on me as the concert progressed. The camera work is very clear, and offers a number of angles, including the popular "Matt-Cam" that showcases drummer Matt Cameron on tunes like "Green Disease." The cameras get good shots of every band member, including McCready working his Strats and Les Pauls like a madman during his solos, but they could've caught a couple more shots of the massive wave of fans at the show that reportedly, at one time, caused the stage to shake.

In addition to all this fine music, both "Lost Dogs" and "Live At The Garden" were only \$11.99 a piece, which is a fantastic price for either package. If you're a PJ fan, I'd urge you to go pick up both of these gems. The band that never ceases to amaze me has done it again.

Triumph the Insult Comic Dog does Sinatra justice



Triumph keeps it real on "Late Night." NBC TV

review by Chris Hvizdak
contributing writer

Not everyone likes humor composed of occasionally brilliant jabs at popular culture piqued with exhilarating plays on societal taboo ordered in a greater framework of poop jokes. If you are such a person, purchasing Triumph's debut CD / DVD combo (all for a reasonable \$12) would likely make you more angry than Bill O'Reilly at an "Al Franken Appreciation Festival." Personally, I both enjoy and find a certain art in the comedy stylings of Triumph and his associate Robert Smigel, whom as indicated by the liner notes functions as "Comedy Producer" and provides "Vocalisms."

So can Triumph transcend the 3 minute skit format and carry a full length album? Well, he's done that and the results are a fair bit more than decent. Among the 21 tracks on the CD, one will likely find that each contains at least one worthwhile gag, and while more than half bear repeat listening. The music itself pulls from a number of genres, as Kurt Loder states on the packaging, including Rap, Caribbean calypso, Irish drinking songs, and metal.

Although Triumph himself performs a few solo tracks including the rap turned-music video "I Keed," a lyrically creative piece titled "Benji's Queen," and the TV Funhouse staple "Underage Bichon" (the related episode airing this past Sunday), the disc is composed primarily of duets performed by Triumph and such contemporary comedy all-stars as Conan O'Brien, Jack Black, Horatio Sans, Maya Rudolph and Adam Sandler. O'Brien's contribution includes his utterance a non-socially acceptable profanity, the impact of which upon his broadcast viewer-ship could be likened to that of running into an old high school teacher at a swinger's club, shockingly humanizing yet tempting in terms of what could be. Sandler's piece is uninteresting. Black collaborates on a track attesting the evils of Bob Barker and his "Spayed or Neutered" campaign while Sans portrays the aged lounge comedian "Stinky Faye," who has a number of delightfully unthinkable punch lines. Also of note is a track to the tune of Monster Mash featuring Blackwolf the "Nerd Of The Rings," a Fillet-O-Fish-eating Gandalf look-a-like whom you may remember from Triumph's visit to the "Star Wars: Episode 2" line last summer. The

CD is rounded out with five prank calls of persistent creativity yet varying quality.

On the DVD, there's more than an hour of footage culled from Triumph's live appearances over the last year featuring the accostment of such special guests as Jared "Subway" Fogle (who, among other things, throws subs to the crowd from his giant, pre-diet pants), the "Dude, You're Getting A Dell!" Kid (a ripe target as he comes off as a real jerk outside the commercials), Kurt Loder and that Fat VJ (the back of the CD tells me his name is Iann Robinson), as well as Janeane Garofalo and some Italian guy from The Sopranos (Vinnie Pastore). Several songs not found on the CD appear in this live video format, as well as a number of songs that are on the CD.

I found the Sans number, in particular, to be worth the entire price of admission as after the song Triumph requests that his character "Stinky Faye" do a few impressions, which manage to hit that wonderful zenith of "taboo comedy for the sake of being taboo" that is far too underrepresented in mainstream media. I speak of an intelligent form of comedy far beyond that of morning shock jocks, scatological humor or jokes designed to be patently offensive. This is a comedy that is presented in such a context and composed of such horrendously offensive elements that it would cause anyone to be labeled a number of unpleasant things if intended literally. In function this comedy is designed not to endorse said horrible things, rather to provide that rush of cultural liberation that only the public speaking of something truly horrendous can deliver. This type of humor is rare in mainstream media, veiled flashes of which appear in the dearly departed broadcast series "Family Guy" and vividly in the also departed cable sketch program "Mr. Show," both immensely popular on DVD yet sadly victims of poor network support.

The CD both carries on and satirizes the tradition of the 50s-era party album, evident in not only its parody title and cover art but also in its cavalcade of ensemble performers who have truly ushered in a new comedy renaissance. If you're a fan of Triumph, if you're a fan of Conan or simply enjoy humor that reaches beyond the formulaic bounds of contemporary stand-up and sit-coms, do pick it up.

A&E Event Spotlight

The Lion Entertainment Board Presents

Comedian
Robbie Printz

Dec. 5 at 9 p.m.
In Bruno's Cafe



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