

'Mars Volta' re-defining progressive rock genre

Reviewed by Paul Weinstein
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Ah, progressive rock. It's a genre music fans either worship or want to beat up after school. For many, it's just an easier way of saying "unnecessarily ridiculous nerd rock." Because complicated time signatures, 20-minute song suites with multiple parts (why not just make them separate tracks?) and guys who wear medieval outfits and think they are wizards are, admittedly, unnecessarily ridiculous and nerdy.

For music fans that like to challenge themselves and can put up with a little cheese, however, prog rock makes sense. Unpredictable compositions keep us on our toes, longer songs just mean more music, and, let's face it, Rick Wakeman's silver capes are cool, in the same way that the "Magic Bullet" infomercial is the coolest thing on television.

Still, the sometimes over-the-top nature of the genre begs the question: Is any of it really genuine? The Mars Volta's second album, *Frances The Mute*, seriously begs that question. It could easily be the most pretentious release of the year, from its multi-sectioned tracks to its Storm Thorgerson abstract artwork (hint: this is the same guy that worked with Pink Floyd). But anyone who has seen Cedric Bixler-Zavala and Omar Rodriguez-Lopez, the two brains behind

the operation, can vouch that these guys really mean what they have to say musically. It's difficult not to take a guy seriously when he, in a frenzy of rockstardom and musical ecstasy, narrowly misses his band mates while spinning his guitar around. And it's

tough to argue with a guy that can throw his mic in the air, swing it a few times, catch it by the cord, pull it to his lips and lick it before singing the song's next line. Even without knowing that stuff, *Frances* is bursting with musical integrity. The four-part opener, "Cygnus ... Vismund Cygnus" pounces on the listener with more ferocity than any other rock release in recent memory. The track settles into a complicated groove under an expressive guitar solo and builds up to an explosion that's just as intense eight minutes later. The intensity doesn't disappear on the next two tracks, the accessible but still respectable "The Widow" and "L'Via L'Viaquez," which contains a Latin section that seems even more genuine than Antonio Banderas singing at the Oscars. It's not easy to place a three-minute ballad next to a 12-minute shapeshifter, but *The Mars Volta* pulls it off. That's what progressive rock is all about.

That's the thing, though. "Progressive" isn't just a meaningless, pretentious term anymore — *The Mars Volta* is actually pushing the genre farther ahead than any digital keyboard or electronic drum has in 20 years. But there are still some problems. In the past, listeners cringed at lyrics about mystic mountains and cosmic warriors; Bixler-Zavala's updated poetry doesn't really answer any questions, but at least it sounds cooler ("those nicotine stains on his every word / my scavenger quilt will only hide the truth"). No, the lyrics aren't really the problem anymore. Instead, the listener is forced to sit through and, presumably, take seriously at least 12 minutes of what could only be defended as "artistic noise." One can imagine that a typical Mars Volta practice contains several hours worth of what we can call "Omar's time." It is during this time that the guitarist/producer emerges from an intense jam, places down his six-stringer and heads over to a console of pretty flashing lights and dials. He then manipulates noises while the rest of the band either watches in awe or goes upstairs for pizza or Bactine for those guitar wounds. Yes, it is unfortunate that a large chunk of ambience could have been trimmed from this album, which would have resulted in a clearer musical focus. As demonstrated by the 30-minute-plus closing suite, "Cassandra Geminni," some of this music is incredible and some of it is too meandering or experimental. But when it hits the mark, *Frances The Mute* speaks for itself.

Long on chemistry, short on story



John Travolta and Uma Thurman had chemistry on the dancefloor, but it wasn't enough to save 'Be Cool' from the ire of critics.

'Be Cool' not cool at all

Reviewed by Nicholas Norcia
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Be Cool thinks it's cool to point out its own shortcomings, as if acknowledging them somehow forgives them, but I don't really think it works that way.

The movie, based on author Elmore Leonard's sequel to the novel that inspired 1995's *Get Shorty*, opens as movie producer Chili Palmer (John Travolta) and Tommy Athens (James Woods), another felon-turned-Hollywood big shot, chat about the artistic failures of *Get Lost*, the sequel to the fictional movie Chili produced in *Get Shorty*.

Chili laments that you can only say the f-word once in a PG-13 movie (like *Get Lost* and *Be Cool*) and then immediately says it ... ha ha. Of course what the PG-13 rating really means nowadays is that it's a film marketed to high school kids, and not at the same crowd that enjoyed *Get Shorty* so much nearly ten years ago.

After Athens gets shot abruptly by a Russian mafia man with an errant toupee, Chili shifts his sights from movies to the record company Athens left behind, now run by his widow Edie (Uma Thurman), whom Chili quickly begins to court.

Chili's first prospect as a record industry bigwig is to sign Linda Moon (Christina Milian), a perky, young singer-songwriter seemingly trapped under a contract with a '70s nostalgia

girl band that is well beneath her talents.

But first Chili will have to get by Raji and Nick, her sleazy managers, played by Vince Vaughn and Harvey Keitel, respectively.

To make matters worse, Chili's new record company owes 300 grand to Sin La Salle (Cedric the Entertainer), a rap producer who travels with an entourage of husky, pistol-packing gangsta rappers.

In order to get his new company out of debt, Chili hatches a plan to make Linda a big star by getting her to sing with Aerosmith, for whom Edie used to be a roadie. Enter Steven Tyler, who tells Chili that he doesn't want to be one of those singers that appears in movies ... ha ha. But judging from his rapid, humorless self-portrayal that instinct was probably a good one.

That's about when the movie stops for a few minutes so that John and Uma can dance to the Black Eyed Peas in a sequence captured without a hint of the pizzazz of the duo's famous *Pulp Fiction* twist, but then it's hard to recreate chemistry when two characters are drawn to each other by nothing more than convenience to the plot.

Then, a little while later the movie stops again, this time so we can watch Linda sing "Cryin'" at a real live Aerosmith concert. What an uninterrupted five-minute rock concert excerpt is doing in a black comedy/crime caper was a mystery to me until I realized that Aerosmith, whose current label is Columbia Records, and *Be Cool*, produced and distributed by MGM,

share the same corporate owner: our good friends at Sony, who can always be counted on for shameless cross-promotional advertising. "I had to get out of the movie business," Chili says earlier, "because it's gone too corporate." ... ha ha.

The film's failings are certainly not the fault of the cast, most of whom come with their respective A-games. André 3000 in particular is quite hilarious as lanky foul-up gangsta Dabu and manages to steal just about every scene he's in.

Dré, Cedric, Vaughn, and even *The Rock* (as Vaughn's gay bodyguard) are clearly trying hard and even manage to get a fair amount of laughs, but far more of their jokes fall flat than hit. This is not their fault but the fault of the director, F. Gary Gray, whose ear for comedic rhythm is clearly untrained.

While Barry Sonnenfeld's direction of *Get Shorty* was airtight, disciplined and moved at an incredibly brisk pace, Gray's idea of comedy direction is forcing his actors to mug for laughs like a pleading stand-up comic until the movie slows to halt and the gags grow stale to the point of embarrassment.

I would strongly caution anyone from seeing *Be Cool*. I found it not only sub-par, but personally insulting. It's one thing to rob us of our time and money with an inferior product, but the fact that the filmmakers realized the movie was shoddy and chose to rub it in our faces instead of making the movie better, makes me think this should have been called *Be Cruel*.

'Kasabian' original and refreshing

Reviewed by Mike Kulick
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Let's get this out of the way first: Kasabian isn't a band with an original sound.

That said, this new band from Leicester, England has introduced a self-titled album to the masses that combines an array of different sounds, most of which sound incredibly refreshing.

"Club Foot," the first track and single from the album, starts out with a subdued noise intro before bursting in with the typical catchy bass line that serves as the backbone of the majority of Kasabian's songs on the album. "Processed Beats," the next song, is probably being played at



This is the type of music you just want to throw in your car CD player, crank the volume until your eardrums feel pleasantly numb and drive until you're either pulled over by an officer of the law or your car runs out of gas.

Many bands have recently brought back the

a dance club somewhere as you read this review.

Every song seems to meander in a slightly different direction, yet it all seems to come off seamlessly. In other words, this whole album would fit in quite nicely with a typical Guy Ritchie flick.

popularity of synthesizers in rock music, but Kasabian does this particularly well. Songs like "Cutt Off" contain a huge amount of cleverly used synth, with a sing/shout chorus by lead vocalist Tom Meighan that rivals some of The Mars Volta's lyrical conundrums: "chew the backbone, a solar system, these clever convicts."

The album ends with "U Boat," a song that shows that the band doesn't necessarily always need crunching bass to deliver a heavy and memorable song.

Kasabian may not sound completely original, but they seem to have a little something for many aspects of your musical tastes. Check out this debut, and ready yourself for more good things to come from Kasabian in the future.

'Bride' charming, funny in bringing Bollywood to Hollywood

Reviewed by Caralyn Green
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Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen's 1813 comedy of manners, has been reworked so many times in so many different contexts it should be way boring by now.

We all know smug Mr. Darcy and outspoken Lizzie will somehow navigate the ruled and rigid social network to get over her pride and his prejudice (or is it that other way around?) and just get it on already.

So why, oh why, has the story stayed so appealing to generation after generation of romantic comedy-a-holics?

Well, because *Pride and Prejudice* is really, really good. It's fun, it's funny, it's honest, and most importantly, it makes any girl (or boy) swoon.

So, taking the reins from Helen Fielding and BBC and that upcoming version starring Keira Knightley, Gurinder Chadha has created yet another *Pride and Prejudice* adapta-

tion — this time with a vibrant Bollywood spirit.

Chadha's *Bride & Prejudice* is an enjoyable, multiculti song, dance and love-fest from the director and writer of 2002's breakout Britflick *Bend It Like Beckham*.

Like *Beckham*, *Bride & Prejudice* has a marriage-hungry mom, a hunky love interest, some spirited chicks who aren't down with the status quo, and lots of stuff challenging racism, sexism, classism, imperialism and consumerism.

The Bennets of rural England transform into the Bakshis of "Hicksville, India," as one character calls their town. Lizzie becomes Lalita, that second eldest daughter who vows to marry for love, and Mr. Darcy stays Mr. Darcy, this time an American hotel mogul named Will who's visiting India for a friend's friend's wedding.

As Lalita, Aishwarya Rai is luminous. She's confident, clever, tastefully sexy and painkillingly gorgeous.

In India, Ash (as the former Miss World is called) is already Bollywood royalty; if this, her first totally English-language role, is any indication, it's only a matter of time before Ash becomes the next Hollywood "It" Girl.

And Martin Henderson (best known for *The Ring*) is up to the challenge of romancing such an accomplished, glamorous heroine — his scowling and smoldering definitely meets the Colin Firth standard of Darcy-ness. Oh la la.

The *Pride and Prejudice* story, naturally, transcends its time and place beautifully: pride stays pride, prejudice stays prejudice and courtship stays courtship.

But Chadha's vision of Austen has something unique going for it: It's patterned after the Indian Bollywood genre.

You know, comedy, action, romance and drama all rolled into one lavish, spectacle-heavy flick, where characters are apt to break out into song-and-dance numbers whenever they feel like

it, and everyone and everything is as pretty as can be.

The bhangra-flavored songs aren't the most memorable ditties ever, but they're full of joy and passion and humor.

A village marketplace boogies it up with a new bride; four sisters tease one another in verse about finding that perfect man who'll talk to their faces rather than their chests; a gospel choir and some *Baywatch*-esque lifeguards swirl around an embracing couple; and Ashanti shows up, gyrating and crooning, at an Indian beach resort.

Bride & Prejudice is not without its flaws though: It crisscrosses the globe (India, England, L.A. and back again), making some scenes feel rushed and lending the narrative a wobbly-at-spots structure.

But its sweet nature and fun-loving charm eclipse that.

It's best to give up any cravings for a high-art cinematic experience, and just take in *Bride & Prejudice*'s kooky per-



'Bride' is a spin off of Austen's classic.

formances, colorful visuals, equally intelligent and slapstick wit, and that eternally relate-able premise of finding some sweet lovin' in the most unexpected people and places.