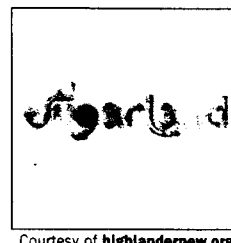


The Incredible Machine

Reviewed by Lindsay Cryer
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Let's be real. Did you actually think that Sugarland's new album would be bad?

The band known for hits such as the soulful breakup song "Stay" and the fun-in-the-sun hit "All I Wanna Do" is back in action.



Courtesy of highlandernow.org

But this time around, fans and non-fans alike can appreciate Sugarland's fourth album "Incredible Machine."

The opening track of the album, "All We Are," begins slow, but leads into a rock-n-roll-meets-country hit featuring a strong use of singer Jennifer Nettles' voice. The song may attract Penn State students for repetition of the words "we are" in the chorus, but that assuredly won't be the only reason to listen to the track.

Already released as a single — and rightfully so — "Stuck Like Glue" is an uplifting song of ever-so-dear relationships that are impossible to let go of. Heartwarming messages aside, the song features awesome harmonies and addicting melodies, light and fun instrumentals, the sound of clapping hands and even an unexpected rap from Nettles.

Nettles' voice is the obvious prominent element in the duo, also featuring singer and multi-talented instrumentalist Kristian Bush. Her voice is also a strength of the record. Don't believe me? Listen to "Tonight." Don't let the fun country music get to your head. This girl can sing.

Give "Shine the Light" a listen for the exact same reason. The song closes the album with perhaps the most meaningful track, which features a lone piano and the best use of Nettles' voice in the record.

The songs on "Incredible Machine" are easily differentiable from the others on the album — something that many artists are unable to achieve — and each is worth at least one listen.

Sugarland will be sure to keep a tight hold on its fans with the release of "Incredible Machine."

For those who aren't diehard country fans, this may not be your go-to album. But with Sugarland, you won't feel like you're standing next to cattle while listening to their music, specifically this album.

This band has certainly proven to be a "Machine" that just keeps on running.

Grade: A-

Download: "All We Are," "Stuck Like Glue," "Shine the Light"

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The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest

Reviewed by Hannah Rishel
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

"The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest" by Stieg Larsson picks up right where "The Girl Who Played with Fire" left off.

Lisbeth Salander — the girl with the dragon tattoo who played with fire and now is kicking hornet nests — is brought to the emergency room after sustaining a gunshot to the back of her head.

If the injury doesn't kill her, she faces a murder trial.

With the help of journalist Mikael Blomkvist, she must prove her innocence by tackling authority figures that have allowed the defenseless, like herself, to suffer horrible mistreatment. Salander has very little idea how many people are tangled in the spider web of the conflict and what they'll do to keep that a secret.

But unfortunately, like the previous two books in Larsson's series, "The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest" is much longer than necessary.

There is an entire subplot involving the former editor-in-chief of "The Millennium" where Blomkvist works.

While the subplot is an interesting mystery, it has nothing to do with the central plot of Salander's trial, but takes up a good portion of the second half of the novel.

At first I thought maybe the harassment was somehow tied to the men responsible for ruining Salander's plot.

This would have been an interesting twist, seeing how entrenched the men were in Swedish society. But no such thing happens and the mystery is solved nearly as abruptly as it's brought up.

It's not that the plot isn't interesting; in fact it could easily have been its own novel if it were fleshed out.

But in a novel where Salander is the dominant force, it is incredibly out of place.

The ending of the third book is both satisfying and open-ended. All the loose ends from the second book, "The Girl Who Played with Fire," are tied up neatly, but Blomkvist and Salander could easily have another adventure.

It should be noted that Larsson is not one to shy away from the gory details of rape that are central to the plot.

He does not give the reader the benefit of fading to black, but instead makes them face the scenes dead on.

Like the previous novels in the series — which should be read first — once you get past the chunks of filler and morbid scenes, you hold in your hands a supremely engaging story.

Grade: B+

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PARANORMAL PREDICTABLE

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Image courtesy of insidepulse.com

New movie 'atrocious'

Reviewed by Karina Yücel
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

The first "Paranormal Activity" was a joke, but I decided to wipe the slate clean and hope that the second installment would be better.

"Paranormal Activity 2" was an atrocious letdown.

I had nightmares after I saw this movie — not because of the demons, but because the Yankees lost. As I was leaving the theater, all I was able to think about was why I missed the game to see this lackluster horror movie.

Like the first movie, it took half the film to get to the good parts.

I understand the film wanted to develop the plot and the controversy, but taking half of the movie to do so is a waste of time.

When the family's "haunted house" is first under surveillance, no one believes that demons or ghosts are there, and two random startling bangs didn't convince me either.

The movie is advertised as a horror film, and frankly, I paid to see someone get possessed. Skip those bangs and get to the day when everything goes to Hell, and when people are screaming because the demons are

chasing and trying to kill them.

That's what I wanted to see, but instead I sat there screaming in my head, "Just get to the interesting stuff."

In the beginning, the audience was confused by how the family in "Paranormal Activity 2" is related to the couple in the first movie.

So if you didn't see the first movie, I would recommend having someone tell you who the characters are and what happened in the end, or else you might be a little lost when you are introduced to Katie and Micah.

But once the audience figures out who everyone is, the movie is predictable.

If you saw the first one, or even watched the commercials for the movie, you knew to expect someone being dragged off while screaming, someone becoming possessed by ghosts or demons or whatever.

Oh, and that someone was going to die. That was pretty obvious.

In the last five minutes of the film, the prequel fast-forwarded to the end of Paranormal Activity, extending the first movie's ending.

Because obviously, after all that the audience had been through, we wanted more.

This installment previews why Katie is possessed in the first movie and how the supernatural forces came to her house.

And in the end of the second, Katie comes back as the possessed person she was at the end of the first film.

Sound confusing? It was. And the actors don't add anything to the movie, either. Obviously they didn't want to use big names because the movie is filmed like a documentary and is meant to feel like you are watching real-life footage.

But I wish the casting team had put a little more effort into finding some unknown names that had at least a little bit of experience.

Seriously, throughout the entire movie, the saddest part is when the demon attacks the dog.

That being said, if you are scared easily by things that go bump in the night, then this movie will freak you out.

My recommendation? You won't be missing anything by missing this movie, and the first one was actually better anyway.

Just save your money.
Grade: F

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DEAR JOHN, JONAS MAYER 'Speak Now' ambiguous, beautiful

Reviewed by Hannah Rishel
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

In 2008, she dared her fans to be "Fearless" and in 2010, Taylor Swift challenges them to "Speak Now."

Surpassing my expectations by leaps and bounds, "Speak Now" is Swift's best, most diverse album yet.

She had a lot of high expectations placed on her third album.

But I had faith that she could do it, especially when I heard she penned every song herself, not enlisting the help of co-writers like she has in the past.

And her personal touch is seen in every song.

Swift hasn't confirmed or denied who inspired any of the tracks, which the exception of "Innocent," a song about forgiveness she wrote for Kanye West that debuted at the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards.

But, with her affinity for naming names, I wondered if "Dear John" is about John Mayer. And if it is, Joe Jonas got off easy with "Forever & Always" on her last album.

But whomever "Dear John" is about deserves a thank-you for inspiring Swift to write this song, which just might be her masterpiece — or at least the best track on the album.

"Don't you think 19's too young / to be played by your dark twisted games / when I loved you so," she sings over a guitar that sounds plucked from one of Mayer's own tunes.

The song could have easily turned spiteful, like "Forever & Always," but instead it shows Swift's progression from being vulnerable ("I fived in your chess game / but you changed the rules every day") to strong ("I'm shining like fireworks / over your sad, empty town").

And I'm guessing Mayer isn't the only famous subject of her songs.

I would say that at least four of the songs are about her ex-boyfriend Taylor Lautner of "Twilight" fame.

The best of the alleged Lautner songs is "Back to December," in which Swift apologizes to an ex-boyfriend for treating him badly.

This is a refreshing change for Swift's sad songs, which are usually about a guy who did her wrong.

But one of the songs that falls short is "Long Live," where Swift takes her

love of fairy tales to the extreme. The prince and princess theme worked in "Love Story," but saying "I had the time of my life fighting dragons with you" is taking it a little too far.

Another weak link on the album is the title track, in which Swift sings about crashing the wedding of an ex-boyfriend to stop him from marrying the wrong girl.

In "You Belong With Me," she innocently pined for her best friend, but in "Speak Now" she takes things to an extreme.

Also, after listening to the entire album, I'm wondering why she picked "Mine" as the first single. While I do like the song, it didn't grab me the way "Love Story" did when I first heard it.

There are so many other stellar tracks on the album that "Mine" falls flat in comparison.

One song that I hope becomes a single is "Better Than Revenge," where Swift takes on an actress, who has stolen her boyfriend, who is "better known for the things that she does on the mattress."

While Lady Gaga wouldn't bat an eyelash at that lyric, those are strong words coming from Swift.

But Swift doesn't seem too bothered by what people, especially the girl who inspired the song, think. After all, there's nothing Swift does "better than revenge."

She also demonstrates this when she takes on the critics in "Mean" — her most country song to date.

She acknowledges the criticisms she's received for her voice with the lyrics, "Drunk and rambling on about how I can't sing."

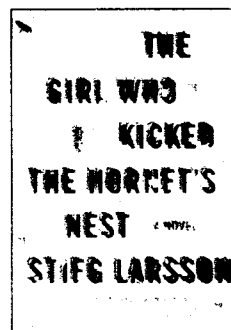
Admittedly, even as a huge fan, Swift's voice sometimes leaves something to be desired, particularly when she performs at award shows. But I didn't fall in love with her music because of her voice.

I fell in love with it because she's a girl, just a few months younger than me, who writes about feelings I can relate to.

And that's exactly what this album does.

Grade: A-
Download: "Dear John," "Better Than Revenge," "Back to December"

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Courtesy of amazon.com



taylor-swift.com