

PC Guy writes second almanac parody

BY JEREMY HELLWIG
Reviewer

These days, most readers never have read an almanac, perhaps causing them to view this type of book with suspicion, apprehension and prejudice. Admittedly, before this summer I felt the same way. "Almanacs are for poor people named Richard," I used to say. Then I found out that the guy who plays the PC on those annoying Apple commercials, John Hodgman, wrote a hilarious book that just happens to be an almanac of complete world knowledge. So I decided to get off my high horse and give almanacs a chance.

Many of you already are familiar with some of Hodgman's work. Hodgman, a former professional literary agent, regularly appears as the tweedy personal computer in Apple commercials as well as on "The Daily Show" as the resident expert. In 2005, he became what he hated most in the world, a professional writer, and published a book called "The Areas of My Expertise." This book, billed as an almanac of complete world knowledge, is jam-packed with "facts" that Hodgman made up about various topics. It was met with success, so he released a sequel, titled "More Information Than You Require" on Oct. 21. Actually, those technically are shorthand titles. If you want to know the full titles, which are very long, try the Internet.

Hodgman's almanac is very different from traditional almanacs. Unlike his predecessors, Hodgman admits that very little information in his book is true. He justifies this by arguing that lies are more interesting and therefore more true than the actual truth. Also, it is kept in the humor section of the bookstore, unlike most other almanacs.

"The Areas of My Expertise" is one of the few books that I have read that actually caused me to laugh out loud. The sequel is just as successful. Hodgman's writing is the perfect blend of absolute seriousness and complete absurdity. He uses a deadpanned, sometimes ominous tone to present



Photo courtesy of Areasofmyexpertise.com
John Hodgman is the author of "More Information Than You Require," an almanac which boasts a combination of fact and humor.

some of the most ridiculous fake information I ever have encountered and does so with meticulous detail. He also includes tables and charts on various subjects, such as dangerous haircuts and the tools they require and the various sequels to Machiavelli's "The Prince."

As this is an election year, the new book is decidedly more political than its predecessor. For example, there is a section about how to

vote, including instructions for dealing with the three most common types of electronic voting machines (ATMs, Colecovisions and mechanical Turkish men playing chess). There also is a table titled "The Precedents of the United States" that lists all of the American presidents thus far and whether they were black, female or had hooks for hands. This section is very similar to the one in his previous book about the 51 states (the 51st be-

ing the mysterious vanishing state called Hoboq).

Another interesting difference between the two volumes is that Hodgman was mostly unknown when he wrote the first book, but he now is regarded as a minor television personality. As a result, the new book provides information on how to become famous as well as details about the life of a famous minor television personality.

Probably the most popular section of the first book is the chapter titled "What You Did Not Know About Hoboes." In this section, Hodgman describes the lifestyles of hoboes during the Great Depression, culminating in an account of the war waged between President Roosevelt and Hobo King Joey Stink-Eye Smiles. He also includes a list of 700 hobo names. In the new volume, Hodgman focuses instead on the mole-men, ancient creatures who live underneath the earth and supposedly built Thomas Jefferson's home and taught him the art of writing declarations of independence. There also is a list of 700 mole-men and their occupations. I am not sure what new group the third volume will cover, but Hodgman hints that there may be a section on the war between the hoboes and the mole-men.

The two volumes have continuous pagination, as they are meant to be the first two parts of a three-volume work. Most pages have a number of footnotes at the bottom. Some of these footnotes are humorous bits of additional details, but others refer the reader to other pages in the work for further information. These notes give the reader the impression that the books were meticulously compiled. I assume this system of notation is used in many almanacs, but because I have never read a real almanac, I am by no means an expert on the subject. Also, unlike other almanacs, there is an audiobook, complete with a theme song. Although I enjoyed Hodgman's books, I doubt I would enjoy reading a normal almanac and therefore have decided that I intend to go back to my original feelings of contempt toward the medium.

Old friends return with much-anticipated albums

BY HARRY BURSON
Reviewer

There's sort of a popularity cap for bands on college radio. Get too famous and you'll lose your niche. Even bands that get early support through college radio will lose it as they outgrow the format.

It's not fair. It's not right, but it's the way the system works. The college audience — and at a certain point the bands — no longer need each other and they move on, as lovers often do.

The story of three such artists whose much-anticipated albums all dropped last week. Although they will not be getting much love from college radio, Guns N' Roses, Kanye West and the Killers owe at least some of their success to past DJs' early support. Let's catch up with some old friends, shall we?

Without any further delay, let's have at it: Guns N' Roses' long-awaited album, "Chinese Democracy." As a perennial rock news story/joke for the last decade or so, I will spare you with any back-story, assuming that you, by now, know the basics: Axl Rose is the only original member left, it's taken 17 years and about 30 band members to record, it was the most expensive album ever made long before it was released, blah blah blah.

While relying on a familiar GN'R hard rock framework, each track is filled to the brim with overdubs. There is nary a moment when something — guitar fill, synth gurgle — isn't going on. About a minute into the opening, titular track, it's clear what took so long to make this

album: obsessive overdubbing.

At first it's disorienting and overwhelming, like seeing a Shakespearean play for the first time. But like Shakespeare, your ear slowly becomes accustomed to the dense information, and while it's a chore, it's rewarding.

So while the soundscapes would make Andrew W. K. blush, they tend to suit Rose and the most memorable guitarist on the album, the Eddie Van Halen-esque Buckethead, who pops up on a handful of tracks with his unique, spacey leads. Rose always has been a dramatic vocalist, and the crowded songs suit his fussy showmanship.

For a group of songs that have been tinkered on longer than most bands' careers, "Chinese Democracy" manages to stay fresh. A few dated electronic loops show up on tracks like "If The World," but overall the production seems current.

Somehow the album works as a cohesive whole. Guns N' Roses is still at its best as a hard rock band ("I.R.S.," "Shackler's Revenge," "Better") and, depending on your taste, its worst with Rose's self-indulgent

balladdeering (the Andrew Lloyd Webber-like "This I Love"). This disc accurately reflects both sides while still remaining digestible.

Make no mistake, this is GN'R's best album since "Appetite for Destruction." Obviously, it wasn't worth the wait — nothing could be — but it's still a great hard rock record, way better than Velvet Revolver. On the other end of the spectrum we have Kanye West's fourth album "808s and Heartbreak" — a minimalist affair written and recorded in a matter of weeks, not years.

Following the death of his mother, West broke off his engagements and retreated to Hawaii, where he made this decidedly bleak disc ruminating on heartache and loss in the tradition of "Sea Change" and "Blood on the Tracks," or more appropriately, "Disintegration."

No, he doesn't rap. Yes, the majority of his vocals are processed through T-Pain's trademark auto-tune software. But it's not as bad as it sounds.

West has for the first time consciously made an album, not just a collection of great tracks.

Utilizing the iconic 808 drum machine on every track along with piano and tribal percussion, this album is insularly similar and very little like anything from West's previous work, except for maybe some of the robo-funk from "Graduation."

The extended minimalist beats and frail singing from the opener, "Say You Will," set the stage for the desolate trip to follow. The beats all are top-notch and unlike anything else you'll hear on the radio today. The lyrics, however, could use some work.

West said he couldn't express his emotions through rapping on this album, meaning he thinks singing is a little more emotional and serious. Consequently, there are no clever lines or jokes here, just a bunch of straightforward sad sack rants. He has shown his knack for serious storytelling interspersed with clever asides on songs like Late Registration's "Roses," on "808s and Heartbreak," but he seems too distraught to come up with any good lines.

Nevertheless, the album works. It's depressing and affecting in a confessional singer-songwriter kind of way. I assure you, it's way better than you think. Speaking of noble experiments, the Killers returned from the critically panned, overambitious debacle that was "Sam's Town" for their third studio album, "Day & Age."

Although the Springsteen-obsessed Americana of "Sam's Town" sold



Photo courtesy of Island Records
From left: Mark Stoermer, Ronnie Vannucci, Brandon Flowers, and Dave Keuning of the Killers

fairly well, it lost the goodwill of the millions of fans who made their danceable debut "Hot Fuss" go triple platinum.

I derived some sick pleasure from the overwrought, earnest balladry of "Sam's Town." Frontman Brandon Flowers is a vacuous pretty boy whose showy, Vegas sensibilities made "Hot Fuss" a minor masterpiece, but when he aimed for profundity with "Sam's Town" it came off as more "Bat out of Hell" than "Born to Run."

Lucky for Flowers, I happen to like both of those albums, and I was able to embrace "Sam's Town" and all of its many, many flaws. As terrible as some of the tracks were, it still was infinitely more interesting than the Band of Horses or Junior Boys albums that came out that year (sorry to offend you hipsters, but bad music is fun even before it's 20 years old).

"Day & Age" definitely is a retreat for Flowers and Co. The pulsing synthesizers of the lead single "Human" are more akin to "Mr. Bright-

side" than "When You Were Young." But instead of the sludgy guitars of "Hot Fuss," the new album is all polish thanks to European electronic producer Stuart Price, who gives the Killers a new sheen.

The guitar is reduced to an atmospheric tool, while Flowers goes wild with layers of synthesizers — I remember a saxophone but can't think of a single guitar solo.

Following in the footsteps of Coldplay's latest, there are disparate world influences throughout the record, as inauthentic as the Eiffel Tower in Vegas. Not that the international schtick is a bad thing — I'd take the faux-Latin bounce of "Joy Ride" over the sappy Springsteen-balladry of "A Dustland Fairytale."

Flowers still is an awful lyricist, but so what — this is a great pop record. Maybe the Killers' best if you're in the right mood.

Whew, I hope that satisfied all your mainstream pop music needs. If not, maybe Beyonce and T-Pain will do it for you. That's it for 2008, look for the College Music Roundup in the spring.

New Doors album incorporates old concerts

BY JOHN HITZEL
Reviewer

"Live at the Matrix" hit the shelves Nov. 18. I almost paid \$24.99 plus tax for it at the music store. Then I realized that, despite being a huge Doors fan, I was broke. So I went online and downloaded it through Amazon for half the price.

These concerts were recorded between the release of The Doors' first single in January 1967 and the band's rise to stardom with the release of its second single, "Light My Fire," that summer. The recordings are compiled from roughly a dozen sets from five consecutive nights of shows in March 1967 at The Matrix, a small, seated club in San Francisco.

The sparse, respectful-but-not-enthusiastic applause at the end of each performance reminds me of how green these guys must have been when they played The Matrix compared to their mega-star status achieved only a year later when touring Europe, they filled arenas with crowds screaming for Jim Morrison to impregnate them with his mind from onstage. Morrison even does a quick "thank you," at the end of "The End." There's this living, breathing quality to The Doors' performances that is evident in this recording much as later shows would embody.

These shows reveal a younger, more innocent incarnation of The Doors than other concert footage and recordings, during a time when most of the band's live material consisted of covers. Listeners witness a relatively subdued Morrison and a more free-to-elaborate (but not jammy) side of the rest of the band,

the grounded yet ethereal Ray Manzarek on keys, the spacey Robbie Krieger on guitar and the solid, never obtrusive John Densmore on drums. As on other live recordings, Manzarek's left hand plays bass. Manzarek sings backup on many tracks, even taking lead on a few. The Doors expand the instrumental sections on a number of tracks, including "Soul Kitchen." Manzarek wails into the instrumental sections with braggadocio and tickles the high ivories during his solos. Densmore is a professional with his dynamics, taking it way down at the perfect times and exploding in tandem with the rest of the band, giving an impression that they've practiced these moments, even though they most likely are off-the-cuff.

Morrison invents new lyrical rhythms on the spot, singing around where fans traditionally would expect his words to come. Where fans typically would expect him to blast out a belly-yawp, he often takes it down to his sultry baritone, enunciating in places where other recordings have him slurred and wily. The effect is great. A Morrison in control of his impulses is his prime form, much more so than the wild, too-drunk-to-sing Morrison of the '70s. "The End" maintains its classic floating-in-space feel, and he improvises new verses here and on "When the Music's Over."

The songs chosen to appear on this two-disc album are a setlist of rarities, including some never-before-heard-live gems like "My Eyes Have Seen You," "People Are Strange" and "Summer's Almost Gone." They cover Slim Harpo's "I'm a King Bee," John Lee Hooker's "Crawling King Snake" and "Money," Howlin' Wolf's (Willie Dixon actually wrote it for him) "Back Door Man," Bo Diddley's "Who Do You Love?" and Allen Toussaint's "Get Out of My Life, Woman." Staples like

"The End" and "Moonlight Drive" are soul-stirring, and the typically toe-tapping "Who Do You Love?" instead revolves around a haunting bend-slide mantra from Krieger, later doing what only The Doors can do to that environment, which is turn the eerie into something sexy and exuberant.

This album has a similar feel to "Essential Rarities" or "Without a Safety Net" on the four-disc boxed set. This is a side of The Doors that isn't polished, but neither is it tarnished. They are young and raw, sans-ego inflation from record sales and local clamor. These tracks showcase a rarely-witnessed side of The Doors, one of them as working musicians, gigging in a small, intimate club and trying to make a name for themselves.

Unless you want the liner notes and the mystic-vulgar album art, don't drop your money on the mandatory \$24.99 for two discs. Just go online and find it for less.

These concerts are akin to that one Allman Brothers or Hendrix show your buddy is always trying to get you to listen to because it has really moved him despite all the fuzz and uneven levels on the recording. And so you always refuse. This time, put your preconceptions aside and get beyond the fidelity to witness a worthwhile chapter in the evolution of a band that refuses to be imitated to this day.

"This is a side of The Doors that isn't polished, but neither is it tarnished. They are young and raw, sans-ego inflation from record sales and local clamor"