

Indie band proves talent

BY CORINNE SCHWARZ
Reviewer

The fledgling indie rock group Vampire Weekend received a lot of press surrounding its January 2008 self-titled debut CD. Spin magazine declared the group the year's best new band even before the CD hit stores. MTV played the "A-Punk" music video in between "The Hills" and "Run's House." With massive press coverage comes massive expectations, and Vampire Weekend could have become another overhyped, underwhelming band that fizzled out after one CD.

But the band's blend of rock melodies with African drumbeats proved to be a successful combination. Vampire Weekend sold almost 30,000 CDs in one week. The band played everywhere from "Saturday Night Live" to the United Kingdom to summer festivals like Bonnaroo and Pitchfork Music Festival.

Vampire Weekend's first full U.S. tour took them to St. Louis on Sept. 10. The band, which had exclusively toured major cities nationally and overseas or played at music festivals, sold out its first show in St. Louis at the Pageant, which holds about 2,000 people. A wide range of age groups was present at the show, from pre-teen girls dancing in front of the stage to middle-aged men coming straight from work and sitting in the balcony.

Before Vampire Weekend could take the stage, however, opening act White Williams played a short, 40-minute set. The band seemed heavily influenced by Animal Collective but without the creativity or energy that drives the latter group. The songs were indistinguishable from one another — the first four songs blended into a muddled collage of bass, synthesizer and pounding drums. Lead singer Joe Williams' stage presence consisted of him awkwardly bouncing up and down while whining into a microphone. The music had moments of clarity, when the audience actually could dance to a bass-driven song, but the synthesizer muted the songs' power.

After Williams' performance, it was time for Vampire Weekend. The group opened its set with "Mansard Roof," the first song off its new CD. Unlike some bands whose CDs sound better than their live performances, Vampire Weekend sounded remarkably similar to the recorded tracks. Certain songs were sped up or slowed down to fit the live setting, and as in the case of "The Kids Don't Stand a Chance," which was slower than the CD version, the audience responded positively to these changes.

Vampire Weekend plowed through all of its songs and two new songs in 40 minutes, about the same length of time the opening band played. Even though



Photo courtesy of XL Recordings
Vampire Weekend (left to right) Christopher Tomson, Ezra Koenig, Rostam Batmanglij and Chris Baio performed Wednesday, Sept. 10 at the Pageant in St. Louis.

the band was technically precise — lead singer Ezra Koenig hit all of the high notes during "Cape Cod Kwassa Kwassa" — the audience seemed a bit disconnected during the brief set. Certain clusters of people throughout the crowd seemed to genuinely enjoy the set, dancing with abandon during "A-Punk" and echoing Koenig's vocals on "One (Blake's Got A New Face)." But the majority of the audience just stood, taking the familiar stance with arms crossed, barely nodding to the

music. If any band is made for dancing, it is Vampire Weekend. Their African-inspired drumbeats, chiming chords and upbeat vocals are as infectious as they are unique. Even with encouragement from the band, people refused to let loose and have fun. During the encore, when the band played "Walcott," the crowd finally seemed to loosen up, but that moment of release was left until the very end of the show.

Vampire Weekend's brief but brilliant performance at the Pageant

showed that it's not just a buzz band — the group has substance to back up its hype. The two new songs the band played gave the audience a taste of the new direction for the group's second CD. The songs still sounded like Vampire Weekend — still catchy, still influenced by Afro-pop — but seemed to be a logical progression from the first CD. Hopefully, Vampire Weekend will avoid a sophomore slump with its second CD and return to St. Louis again for another amazing concert.



Photo courtesy of Focus Films

Coen brothers release screwball comedy

BY HARRY BURSON
Reviewer

And here we have it: the inevitable screwball comedy to cleanse the palette after the Coen brothers' well-deserved Oscar for last year's "No Country for Old Men."

After earning much critical goodwill for their last outing, the brothers make a complete stylistic departure with their new film "Burn After Reading." This is a strategy they've employed before, following "Blood Simple" with "Raising Arizona" and "Fargo" with "The Big Lebowski." "Burn After Reading" is a farcical spy comedy with a labyrinthine plot that values fleeting comic moments over a coherent storyline.

The Hitchcockian McGuffin in this movie is a lost disc containing the memoirs of former CIA analyst Osborne Cox — played by a hilariously irritable John Malkovich. The disc is recovered by personal trainers Linda Litzke (played by Coen veteran Frances McDormand) and Chad Feldheimer (Brad Pitt).

The two hard bodies mistake drivel for international secrets and attempt to blackmail Cox, but eventually sell information to the Russians in order to pay the hefty fee for Litzke's cosmetic surgery. The conversations between the utterly vacuous Pitt and the fuming Malkovich are the comic highpoints of the film.

Meanwhile, Cox's wife Katie (played by recent Oscar winner Tilda Swinton) is planning to divorce her husband and marry nitwit philanderer Harry Pfarrer (George Clooney). Pfarrer, however, is too involved with constructing elaborate devices in his

basement to impress his online-dating matches, one of which just so happens to be Litzke.

Got it? Of course you don't. The film revels in its confusing web of interconnected idiots. Absurd, base motivations drive each character. There is no emotional core to this movie, only a series of ridiculous plot points that serve as opportunities for more jokes.

The Coen brothers acknowledge the script's complexity with the introduction of a CIA boss (played by deadpan "Juno" dad, J.K. Simmons) who receives plot summary in the form of agency reports. As the film winds to its close, he tells his subordinate not to come back until "it starts to make sense."

After a few surprising murders, the film abruptly ends after 96 minutes with a tidy wrap up in a short scene between Simmons and his underling.

The characters meet their fates and no one really learns anything.

Fans of "The Big Lebowski" won't mind the meandering plot, but they will miss the warm presence of a character like "the dude." Fans of the Cormac McCarthy-derived existential ennui of "No Country for Old Men" will be turned off by the lack of substance.

Clearly the critics have not forgotten the masterpiece that won the Coens their most recent Oscar. Reviews have been perhaps a little too positive for something that is little more than fluff.

The Coens are undeniably witty and talented, but "Burn After Reading" is not going to stick with you. It's funny at times, but not one of the Coens' best.

Hamlet 2 rocks theater with laughs

BY STEPHANIE HALL
Reviewer

Another indie movie that got its break from Sundance 2008, "Hamlet 2" is a blasphemous mixture of "High School Musical" and "Mr. Holland's Opus" with a little ghetto thrown in. With main songs, "Rock Me Sexy Jesus," and "Raped in the Face," the movie has gotten buzz for its indecent and immoral content. But after watching, viewers will find themselves laughing hysterically at things they never would have dreamt could be funny.

The movie stars Steve Coogan, a relatively unknown actor in America, unless audiences remember his role as Octavius in "Night at the Museum." Across the Pond, however, Coogan is a comedic icon, having reinvented himself as Alan Partridge and starred in several TV and radio shows as this separate persona. Coogan has dived into American cinema, starring in "Hamlet 2" and playing a director in the new movie "Tropic Thunder."

"Hamlet 2" starts off with a montage of Coogan's character Dana Marschz's past acting endeavors, including a herpes commercial and a nameless extra on "Xena: Warrior Princess." After his failed acting career, Dana tries out the idiom, "Those who can't do, teach," ending up in "the place where dreams go to die," Tucson, Ariz.

One day, after years of teaching drama and directing horrible movie-inspired plays with his two dedicated drama students, Dana Marschz's drama class grows from his usual two to a room full of rowdy Latino students unwillingly placed in his class. With words of encouragement from a review, Marschz decides to create his own play. Thus, "Hamlet 2" is born.

His failed acting career and unruly class are just the beginning of Dana Marschz's problems. At home, his wife (Catherine Keener, "40-Year-Old Virgin") blames his polyester suits and perpetual rollerblading for his sterility. This tension combines with their disdain for their creepy new boarder, Gary (David Arquette

from the "Scream" films).

The movie's script is a rather predictable story of a drama teacher trying to inspire his students while saving the drama department of the school. However, it is the characters that make this movie. A teacher's pet, an artsy suburban white girl and the Mexican troublemaker make up the cast of this new musical.

Most of the students cast in "Hamlet 2" are unknown actors, including Joseph Julian Soria. Marschz casts Octavio (Soria) as Hamlet in hopes of bringing the young troublemaker into the world of acting and off the streets.

As the play finally comes together, the principal, parents and the school board all begin to question the validity of the play and eventually shut down production.

But with the ever-optimistic Marschz, and a little illegal help from his new cast and civil rights attorney Cricket Feldstein (Amy Poehler), they find a way to put on the performance of their lifetime.

All in all, the movie starts off well with funny lines dispersed throughout, but by the time the musical rolls around, it has the audience laughing nonstop. The movie combines slapstick comedy, irony, sarcasm and political incorrectness, appealing to all types of humor.

Following an increasing trend, the movie pokes fun at stereotypes, especially racial, bringing them to light in a comedic way instead of skirting them completely. Director Andrew Fleming creates dynamic characters that make this type of humor possible and give audiences a different perspective on stereotypes and race. The characters take on a life of their own, growing and changing throughout the movie.

However, it was Coogan's character Dana Marschz who really set the tone for the whole movie. His quirky, almost Gene Wilder-like manner creates the lovable if not slightly crazy teacher.

The best advice is to see "Hamlet 2" with a bunch of friends who love to laugh and are not easily offended by a religious deity rocking out.

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