



Photo courtesy of last.fm
Jamie Cullum kept his fans listening with his latest album, while the Gorillaz took their sound to a new level.

Gorillaz impress with latest



BY COREY BOMMEL
 Reviewer

What do you call it when a cartoon band turns into a real boy? It would have to be known as the Gorillaz. With their third CD, they have shown they are much more than a side project and deserve to be the main act. With the Gorillaz selling more albums in the U.S. than co-creator Damon Albarn's original project Blur, the Gorillaz have officially stepped onto the main stage.

After five years, the much anticipated "Plastic Beach" was released to a music starved public. Fictional band members 2D, Noodles, Murdoc and Russell have re-united along with a massive cast of extras to produce an album rich in layer and presentation. Rapper Mos Def even gets his own fictional character, Sun Moon Stars, for his two guest appearances on the album. However, Albarn remains the core of the band — writing, producing, singing and playing most of the instruments on the album.

The album has a connecting thread of consumerism and

waste, with the beach being overtaken by plastic and trash. It was inspired by a trip to a Mali landfill by Albarn. The concept of recycling this used trash is touched upon with the mash-up of styles and collaborators on "Plastic Beach."

What this album doesn't have is any singles as steeped in pop as those from their older albums. There is no equivalent to "Feel Good Inc." or "Clint Eastwood." Although the styles seem to be all over the place at times, the album still manages to be the greatest yet from the Gorillaz and one of the best albums released this year.

There are really too many great songs on this album to do them any justice here. After an instrumental opener, the listener is treated to the familiar, laid-back styles of Snoop Dogg on "Welcome to the World of the Plastic Beach." From the beginning, the listener is bombarded by similar guest stars with Kano, Bashy, Mos Def, Bobby Womack, Gruf Rhys and De La Soul performing on the first six tracks alone. "Rhinestone Eyes" is the first song in which Albarn sings on his own, and is one of the best tracks on the album. It's a melancholy ballad full of 80's style synths and stuttering chants. Lou Reed's charming vocals are also a shining point on "Some Kind of Nature." "Plastic Beach" will go down as one of the best albums of

2010. With its sharp production, varied vocal guests and generally great musicianship, it will remain relevant for years to come.

Also recently released was "The Pursuit" from British jazz-pop singer-songwriter Jamie Cullum. The album was released in the UK in November but has only now made its leap across the pond. Cullum still is exploring the number of styles he can successfully pull off with his fourth studio album.

Not so much a jazz cat with his hand in pop as he is a pop master with a love for jazz, Cullum explores the full spectrum of musical influences he can jam into one CD. This is a departure from his previous albums in which he focused on one style or another for the entire album, such as his "Pointless Nostalgic." On "The Pursuit," the listener will find piano heavy pop-songs, jazz waltzes, big band jazz and hip-hop influences alongside classic jazz. Don't forget to throw in Cullum's gimmick of

jazzed up pop songs — among others on this album is his own take on Rihanna's "Don't Stop the Music." This song will catch you off guard until you hear the familiar chorus.

"Mixtape" is the culmination of the essence of the album. It's a song about making a mixtape for a lover and the intentions of the tape are revealed as Cullum croons, "Make you a mixtape that's a blueprint of my soul/Make you a mixtape that'll charm you into bed, it details everything that's running round my head." Cullum mentions a cavalcade of artists from Louis Armstrong and Nine Inch Nails to Coltrane and Morrisey, among others. It brings

together the mixture of styles that you get on "The Pursuit." Cullum's past fans, as well as fan's of quirky jazz-pop, are sure to pick this one up. The album's style is all over the place, but it is a welcome addition to any lounge music collection.

Spinoff doesn't capture excitement of movie



BY ALEX CARLSON
 Reviewer

James Cameron's gargantuan sci-fi film *Avatar* is easily one of the biggest and most technically-achieving films of this generation. The fantastically designed world of Pandora was one for the ages. As expected of such a big film, *Avatar* was given a licensed video game to coincide with its release. *Avatar: The Game* is the video game parallel to Cameron's modern epic, but just because it shares the *Avatar* name doesn't mean that it's worthy of praise. As far as movie-to-game translations go, *Avatar: The Game* fails to deliver in nearly every way.

The gameplay in *Avatar* is divided into two parts: the RDA and Na'vi. The player makes the decision as to which faction they will follow early in the game. However, gameplay is underwhelming no matter which path the player decides to take.

When playing under the RDA, the game plays as a typical third-person shooter, with the occasional driving sequences. Players are equipped with different weapons, like a machine gun or grenade



Photo courtesy of gamespot.com
Avatar: The game doesn't live up to the high expectations set by the box office hit. The game becomes repetitive and suffers from lagging gameplay.

launcher, and can blow up hostile fauna and Na'vi warriors. On its own, *Avatar* would be a completely competent — though, underwhelming — shooter. But the game is rendered frustrating due to a horrible auto-lock system. When running through the environments, the player's aim will automatically lock onto the nearest enemy, or, in most cases, the nearest random plant. This makes firefights a hassle and gets tiresome quickly.

Guns become secondary to a selection of melee weapons when

playing as the Na'vi. Players can carry a firearm in addition to a bow. But, as Na'vi warriors, they will mostly use clubs, staffs and dual-blades to take out enemies. While the use of melee weapons does make the auto-aim much less of a problem, the repetition continues as swarms of enemies continuously open fire and come to fight.

The design of *Avatar* is cumbersome and difficult to navigate. The different environments are great to look at, but the overuse of foliage and branch-

ing paths make finding your way through Pandora a chore. Vehicles are even worse, as the RDA vehicles frequently crash and get stuck on rocks. *Avatar*'s world construction is too big and too cluttered to be worth exploring.

The missions are boring, regardless of which faction the player is a part of. The goal is to find "shards" that power the planet and open the door to the fabled Well of Souls. To get these shards, the player must travel absurdly long distances, fight

off waves of enemies or perform other menial tasks that have nothing to do with the film's premise. Unresponsive controls and an uncooperative camera don't help the battles or navigation.

The only redeeming factor of *Avatar: The Game* is the graphics, and that alone is a stretch. The world of Pandora is beautifully rendered. Colossal waterfalls, floating mountains and diverse plant life all feel like they've been ripped right from the feature film. Sadly, frame rate becomes a major flaw once the action begins. At critical times in battles, the game will chug and stutter, ultimately losing any sense of timing and finesse the gameplay had. It's a true shame, because *Avatar: The Game*'s wondrous vistas and scenery stay true to the movie's graphical strengths. Ultimately, the game just can't keep up.

The sound design retains the tribal musical themes of the film, but the voice work is average at best. Apathetic mission briefs and shallow characters cripple the sound presentation of the game.

Avatar: The Game must be commended for trying to create a virtual Pandora to explore, but the end result is a slow, boring and cumbersome action game. If you want to see *Avatar* as it should be, watch the movie and ignore the disaster that is *Avatar: The Game*.

Depp fails to stand out in Burton film



BY KEN DUSOLD
 Reviewer

Tim Burton is one weird man. His films almost always depict child or adult fantasy-lands in a rather nightmarish way. Burton's "Batman" and "Batman Returns" are prime examples of a Gotham City in which no sane or normal person actually wants to live. "Edward Scissorhands" is set in an irritatingly perfect town in the 1950's and Burton's "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" — a remake of the classic "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory" — is filled with creepy, pedophile-like characters within the candy company from Hell. However, Burton's imagination is what keeps us coming back for more. "Alice in Wonderland," his newest endeavor, is 100 percent Burton, although it lacks a proper ending to an

otherwise eccentric adaptation of the classic story from Lewis Carroll.

Burton's adaptation is not a remake, per se. The original story of "Alice in Wonderland," depicted in the 1951 Disney animated version, is not present. This is a different story with the usual suspects from the Carroll books. Traces of Burton can be seen almost immediately, with the introduction of a young Alice, suffering from nightmares of Wonderland, and her industrious father, who seems just as imaginative and bonkers as Burton.

Following a brief exchange between the young Alice and her father, the story jumps 13 years into the future, where traces of the director's touch become apparent. For example, when we first see teenage Alice (Mia Wasikowska), the paleness of her skin is comparable to that of a corpse, just as Christina Ricci looked in "Sleepy Hollow." And once Alice escapes a forced wedding engagement party in her honor and falls down the infamous rabbit hole, we're introduced to a disturbing and dark Wonderland, reminiscent of Burton's version of Willy

Wonka's chocolate factory. The flowers and plant stems are massive and brightly colored, though the 3-D projection slightly hinders the vibrancy of those beautiful colors. This serves as just one of the many reasons to prefer that films be distributed in 2-D.

The characters Alice encounters in Wonderland are just as strange, tormented and slightly sadistic as they have been imagined by many loyal Carroll fans for years. The seemingly disinterested and unsympathetic Absalom, the blue caterpillar (voice by Alan Rickman) regularly seen smoking a hookah, reminds audiences that this story might not be as much the children's story it's often believed to be, but rather an imaginative and faraway place for adults to leave behind that which is considered normal.

The Mad Hatter (Johnny Depp) is, for lack of a better description, simply mad. Although Depp's performance as an awkwardly creepy, somewhat delusional, eternally smiling and partially bipolar man is quite similar to his portrayals of Willy Wonka, Edward Scissorhands and Ichabod Crane, it is most appropriate for this



Photo courtesy of rottentomatoes.com
Tim Burton's adaptation of the classic story written by Lewis Carroll fails to demonstrate any new talents of Johnny Depp but shows imagination with the scenery of the film.

role. Unfortunately, Depp fails to stand out as much as he should because of his inability to bring to the screen something we have not previously seen.

The CGI also is a bit uneven, particularly whenever we see the Red Queen (Helena Bonham Carter) and the Knave of Hearts (Crispin Glover). Both move about the screen in an unnatural fashion, as the heads — obviously patterned after the actors — do not match the computer generated bodies and movements of the characters.

The ending also seems uneven when contrasted with the rest of the film. Burton creates a terrific story of intriguing and surprisingly compelling characters only to end everything with a common and unimaginative action sequence. Why does a film have to end in a battle scene? With unique and extraordinary characters, Burton could not conceive of a more appropriate finish? Even if you accept that all of the building tensions will conclude in an ultimate battle, the battle itself is solely anti-climatic.

The film does benefit from

art direction deserving of honorable acknowledgement, costume designs which complement the original mind of its director and effective acting from Wasikowska, Depp and Anne Hathaway (as the White Queen). Hathaway radiates the whimsicalness of the story and visually relishes the opportunity to bring the character to life.

Notwithstanding a disappointing ending and broken CGI, Burton's newest picture meets expectations for a fanciful and fun excursion into Wonderland.