

MOVIE REVIEWS

'The Ladykillers'

The Coen Brothers have hit a creative iceberg. The first signs of trouble began with 2000's *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, which, though entertaining, contained no compelling subtext beneath its dazzling cinematography and bluegrass music.

Last year's *Intolerable Cruelty* was also devoid of ideas, as it relied on the Coens' well of wittiness, which, bottomless as it may be, is not enough to quench an audience's thirst all on its own.

Joel and Ethan Coen's latest effort, a Disney-produced farce called *The Ladykillers*, once again seems hastily phoned in.

Tom Hanks hams it up as a sinister Southern intellectual who orchestrates a handful of oafish crooks to rob a riverboat casino by tunneling through the cellar of a Baptist widow. The Coens make no attempt to layer this heist with the detail we've come to expect from good heist movies or from other Coen movies.

Instead, they force silly slapstick sequences that, while occasionally funny, only serve to remind the viewer how atypically dumb and boring *The Ladykillers* cast is compared to the colorful bunch from Coen films past.

Although the final morbid minutes of *The Ladykillers* attempt to hearken back to the Coens' early grisly greatness, the effort is far too lazy and artificial.

Three out of their last four films have been disappointments — 2001's independently produced *The Man Who Wasn't There* is the masterful exception — and this coming from filmmakers who had struck gold on each of their first seven movies.

My advice to the Coens: We know you're witty and camera-savvy. Now tell us a story we care about.

— Reviewed by Nicholas Norcia

'Scooby-Doo 2'

This past weekend I gave the Premiere Theater an hour and a half of my life that I can never get back: I saw *Scooby-Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed*.

I grew dumber as the movie progressed, and I realized that it was necessary for me to warn any human being with taste that this movie is, to quote Shaggy himself, "sucktacular."

The premise of this disaster is that all the gang's old foes return with vengeance as the mastermind, Old Man Something-or-Other and/or Professor What's-His-Name, creates a machine that brings monsters to life.

Mystery Inc. is back, and each member of the gang has brought along his or her own drama. Daphne (Sarah Michelle Gellar) fears she's just another pretty face; Fred (Freddie Prinze Jr.) questions whether talking about his fears makes him less of a man; Velma (Linda Cardellini) falls in love; Scooby sets a monster on fire using his own flatulence; and Shaggy (Matthew Lillard) does Whip-its.

There are highlights in this movie although they're few and far between. Lillard is an excellent comedic actor; he has the timing and the physical ability to pull off this ridiculous character.

The animation is also excellent, although it's a pity the studio wasted any amount of time and money creating these effects for a movie that can't make decent use of them.

For those of you who were worried that you wouldn't be able to enjoy *Scooby-Doo 2* because you haven't seen the first one, that's simply not an issue.

You won't be able to enjoy the second film because it's awful.

— Reviewed by Abigail Silber

ALBUM REVIEW

'The Blue Album'

Remember sixth grade?

Boy, I sure do. Way back before math classes had special names and Jim Carrey was a respectable actor, we'd eat breaded chicken patties for lunch and talk about the songs we liked from the radio. Oh yeah, and Weezer. We all liked Weezer. And a lot of us, despite Weezer's current penchant for mediocrity, still do.

Weezer's first self-titled album, a.k.a. *The Blue Album*, came out when I was in sixth grade. It's been 10 years. And now, as part of some grand evil scheme to make me feel really old, it's been reissued with a bonus disc full of rarities.

You should own *The Blue Album* if you don't already. Time has been very kind to it. It's a record, along with *Pinkerton*, every college student should have. There's a reason so many of them do, and it's not just to play at middle school reunions.

It's just a great pop-rock album.

And the bonus material the band tacked onto *Blue* for this reissue is definitely good; "Jamie" and "Susanne" both stand up next to anything Rivers ever came up with, and the demos of *Blue Album* tracks are interesting enough. But none of it's really all that rare, and none of it justifies paying double for a record that's plenty amazing on its own.

If you're a Weezer fan worth your salt, you've got no need to replace your original *Blue Album* (unless, of course, you broke it), and you've probably already heard most of the second disc on your own. And if you're just a casual fan, the price of this set is likely more than you'd be willing to shell out for a 10-year-old record. Who, then, is this reissue for? Your little brother who likes Eminem, that's who. Remember, Christmas is just around the corner.

— Reviewed by Paul Thompson



Mark J. Terrill/Associated Press

Usher has the boyish charm and fancy dance moves, but his new album is nothing but sloppy R&B sap.

Yeah! or No?

Usher leads his career astray with new album

Reviewed by Paul Thompson

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Lil Jon, you genius. I don't know how you do it. But, with two fingers on a synth and that yelling thing you're so famous for, you can make even Usher sound good.

Not even Usher can do that anymore.

Usher is a fine singer, a fancy dancer and always seems like a nice guy when I see him interviewed. Since I'm not usually in the business of buying Usher records, all I've ever heard the man do were his singles, all of which have been great. You know what I'm saying. "U Don't Have to Call?" Classic.

So I like Usher. And I love "Yeah!" It's the kind of totally unstylish, shrink-wrapped R&B I know better than to get into, but man, you play that song, and the party is on. Ludacris absolutely kills his verse, Lil Jon continues to further Dave Chappelle's career, and Usher ... well, Usher is the singer on that song. It could be anybody.

And that's the thing about Usher. Back when he wanted to leave the one he was with and start a new relationship with me, I thought, hey, I could do worse. And when I reminded him of a girl that he once knew (which, he reassured me, was why he just couldn't get with me), I was surprisingly cool with it. But on "Yeah!" just as he is throughout all of his new album, *Confessions*, I hear somebody singing, but I don't hear Usher coming through. It could, like I said, be anybody.

The Just Blaze-produced standout "Throwback" is just that, with Usher on a serious Freddie Jackson tip throughout the whole track. And I don't even care what Usher's saying on the other highlight, "Take Your Hand." All I can hear is the beat.

But there are 17 songs on *Confessions*, and only three of them are good. And their success is entirely in the production. You've got it bad, Usher. I don't mean that in a nice way.

Sure, there's a lot of stuff that may or may not be about Usher's recent breakup with Chilli (of the late, not-so-great TLC) on *Confessions*. And hey, I watch *Celebrities Uncensored*, I love hearing dirt about famous people. But his delivery is so flat, and the details so nonspecific, that after, like, 300 ballads in a row, not even voyeurism keeps me interested. God, Usher, how many ballads do you really need?

Unless Usher is really confessing how low he is on ideas, *Confessions* needs a new title.

Usher's too nice to be a scumbag like R. Kelly (the influence of whose terrible *Chocolate Factory* is all over *Confessions*), but he's too deep in the game to make a pop record like the similarly boyish Mr. Timberlake. He's just lost in some sort of sloppy R&B purgatory, showing himself only long enough to cut a great single every couple years, dance around in a Twix commercial and then leave. Let's just hope when he comes back next time, he's actually got something worth confessing.

Smith's no longer livin' on the edge with 'Jersey Girl'

Reviewed by Randi Milgram

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The curse is lifted. Well, sort of.

Ben Affleck's acting career has regained some needed dignity with the release of *Jersey Girl*, written and directed by a surprisingly sentimental, instead of rebellious, Kevin Smith. The movie promotes an idealistic view of familial conflicts and is, at times, unbearably sappy. However, unlike the Bennifer piece de resistance that can go un-named, it does not make you throw up. Instead, several sincerely touching moments shine through all the sap.

The real issue here is not that *Jersey Girl* puts Affleck back on track toward making significant, non-action films after *Daredevil* and *Paycheck*, though. Rather, the essential purpose is Smith's development as a filmmaker.

Jersey Girl, though one of the most maudlin movies of recent, shows us the softer side of Smith and is a far cry from his curse-laden, shocking "think" pictures such as *Clerks*, *Dogma* and *Chasing Amy*.

And what a soft side it is. Although he gave a noble effort, Smith made *Jersey Girl* too emotional. In interviews, Smith did divulge this movie's, um, tender tendencies, but he underestimated.

A lot. Still, *Jersey Girl* is a good start for both Smith's journey into the next

level of his filmmaking as well as Affleck's path to making good movies again.

Affleck plays Ollie Trinke, a big-time music publicist in New York. His perfect life shatters to pieces when his wife, played, of course, by Jennifer Lopez, dies during childbirth. No, I didn't ruin a crucial plot point. You knew J. Lo was out in less than 15 minutes, especially after all the previews cut her out completely.

Forced to take care of baby Gertrude while dealing with tragedy, Ollie expectedly breaks down and loses his job in a rather public fashion. He decides to move to New Jersey to live with his comical but wise father, played to my (and everyone's) great delight by the comical but wise George Carlin.

Draining the audience of any patience for him, Ollie shows despicable attempts at "fatherhood," such as expecting his father to take care of the baby while he tries to get back into the music industry.

Cut to seven years later, and we laughably have to believe that the only job Ollie could get in Jersey is a street sweeper. At least he has a solid relationship with little Gertie, played by Raquel Castro, who bears a strong enough resemblance to Lopez. The adorable and sprightly Castro exudes potential, and her star quality propels the movie forward despite the increasingly saccharine plot.



Peter Sorel/Associated Press

Liv Tyler (right) stars as a potential love interest for Ollie, played by Ben Affleck.

The incorporation of Liv Tyler as Maya, a potential love interest for Ollie, is somewhat uneven, but rightfully so because it shows the difficulties people face in trying to move on from tragedy. The bubbly Tyler offers a friendly face, a voice of reason, and most importantly, the use of the phrase "mercy hump" in one of the film's best lines.

In the most annoyingly predictable and overdrawn dilemma, Ollie seems to have adjusted to Jersey living, but he still vainly hopes to return to his big city lifestyle even if it means uprooting Gertie.

The big, expected, oh-so-climactic issue pits his own aspirations against the hopes of his daughter. Hmmm, I

wonder which side will win in the end, especially in a movie promoting family love...

But that is the notable aspect at work here. Kevin Smith so openly displaying his emotional instead of rebellious side says a lot about the man we thought we knew.

So, yes — It's an overly sentimental drama. Yes, it's ridden with predictable plot twists and plagued with clichés. But *Jersey Girl* represents something more important than a sentimental family movie — it is a stepping stone toward Smith's maturation as a more grown-up and sensitive filmmaker. For that reason, and of course for George Carlin, it is worth seeing.

'Nevermind' the criticism: 'Winning Days' ahead for The Vines

Reviewed by David Tatasacore

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The Vines got a raw deal. The group somehow became one of those bands that is incredibly easy to criticize. It's too garage. It tries to sound too Nirvana. It's too damn Australian. People's livelihoods depend on this stuff.

I blame the British. That usually works well enough for dictators. But really, just because our dentally challenged cousins across the Atlantic proclaim that an unstable Aussie is no less than the reincarnation of Kurt Cobain doesn't mean you should start subscribing to the revolution right away.

The hype created by the British press is the kiss of death. Just look, it made The Strokes out to be the new messiah of rock, the leader of the latest phase of garage revival made up of "the" bands.

I've got news for you, mate. The Strokes didn't learn to play in their garages; it was their Park Avenue

penthouses and Swedish boarding schools where they cut their teeth. They're freakin' awesome, but don't get carried away.

So it's no surprise that by the time The Vines' sophomore release, *Winning Days*, reached our shores, the level of skepticism had risen to fever pitch. *Room on Fire* was the same kind of beast (though admittedly, far more solid).

In order to come off as credible, it's imperative for the cynical American press to go 180 degrees and fire back at uncompromising praise with equally impaired criticism.

But you and I are discerning music lovers. We're neither masters nor slaves to the hype. The simple fact is garage rock is a sham; it's absurd.

It's people taking a natural musical response to the post-Nirvana sludge that radio calls "modern rock" and referencing it with a label.

Nirvana was mislabeled as grunge to serve a similar purpose: to give the movement a photogenic figurehead. And at our expense, he turned out to be a martyred one.

We know all this; The Vines should know this, and yet *Winning Days* still manages to be self-defeating in ways.

The band's undiagnosed bi-polar lead singer Craig Nicholls is no Kurt Cobain. The first two tracks of *Winning Days*, the super catchy "Ride" and "Animal Machine," do happen to recall the stop-start dynamics and guitar onslaught of The Vines' most frequently cited influence.

Nicholls is just nowhere near that level of golden god-hood; not yet, anyway.

Nicholls and Co. (with big props to producer Rob Schnapp) also happen to be studio perfectionists, as evidenced by the sublime balance

between hard rock and cloud nine psychedelia they achieve on "TV Pro," easily my favorite track.

And that's where the band's future lies, in an area where it's already outmatched the remaining gaggle of "the" bands. But whether or not Nicholls can grow into a bona fide musical eccentric based on this strength, it's when he and The Vines start to just churn out pop songs that they go astray.

The album's midsection is a soggy core. It doesn't have a lot to offer besides throwbacks from the band's debut, *Highly Evolved*: unremarkable straightforward rockers and pastoral 1960s Brit-pop fuzz that are anything but, well, evolved.

Winning Days isn't exactly a sophomore slump. It's no *In Utero*, either. The Vines are guilty of riding the "the" wave with this album, but after a few listens you can pick out the promising moments from the rest, which is a copout. Just give the guys some time; they'll be back.

Hey, at least they're not The Hives. Or Jet. Ugh, Jet.



Courtesy of Amazon.com