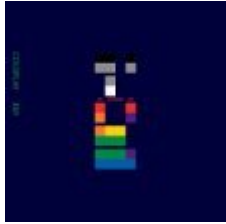


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[X&Y](#) ~ Coldplay

★★★★☆ **Solidifying their place among rock's elite bands**, October 7, 2005

Coldplay's "X&Y" doesn't quite equal their breakout album, 2002's "A Rush of Blood to the Head," but in many ways, it's more interesting. With a few notable exceptions, Chris Martin and company refuse to rest on their considerable laurels, instead endeavoring to expand and diversify their sound. There are explorations into art rock, electronic, and traditional music - some successful, others not quite so. Brian Eno makes a guest appearance, and there are excerpts of a Kraftwerk song. For the most part, Coldplay refuses to play it safe, instead forging ahead with their development as a band and musicians.

The first five songs range from the pulsating opening track "Square One," the gently building, introspective "What If," the multilayered "White Shadows," the dramatic "Fix You," and the catchy "Talk." "Fix You" is undoubtedly the centerpiece of "X&Y" and arguably Coldplay's best song ever. If your spine doesn't tingle when the bridge's driving guitar riff begins, check your pulse!

After the first five songs, Coldplay veers dangerously close to filler territory. The title track and "Message" call to mind the soporific strains of their 2000 debut, "Parachutes." "Hardest Part" is a fairly generic rock number that sounds like it could have been written by anyone. On the other hand, there's "Speed of Sound," which is pretty much a rewrite of the band's 2002 smash hit, "Clocks." It's a pretty egregious rehash; you can sing most of "Clocks'" lyrics to "Speed of Sound" (try it!)

Fortunately, Coldplay ends "X&Y" with several strong tracks. There's "Low," which starts with a Superdrag-like driving guitar, features that Eno midsection, and ends with a heavy-duty climax. The band also reveals a folksy side with "Swallowed in the Sea" and a hidden track, disguised in the listing here as "+" but introduced in concert as "Till Kingdom Come," a tribute to Johnny Cash.

Martin explores his vocal range with a tentative and erratic falsetto; he's not quite as accomplished a vocalist as Keane's Tom Chaplin or even Radiohead's Thom Yorke, who exert better command over their voices. But what Martin lacks in technique, he makes up for in heartfelt emotion. His voice exudes a warm familiarity that comforts the listener.

"A Rush of Blood to the Head" earned Coldplay a place among rock's elite bands; "X&Y" shows they deserve to stay there.



[Hopes and Fears](#) ~ Keane

★★★★☆ **The little band that could**, March 16, 2005

Another fresh musical breeze has blown in across the Atlantic from the British Isles. Keane is a three-piece Brit-pop outfit that to some extent follows in the footsteps of bands like Radiohead, Travis, and Coldplay. However, while influenced by their predecessors, Keane fashions a gentle yet full-bodied sound that's all their own. This is earnest, sincere pop/rock, delivered without a hint of cynicism.

The uniqueness of Keane's sound results partly from their decision to dispense with guitars completely. The songs certainly don't suffer from the absence of a guitarist. Keane's heavy reliance on piano invites comparisons to Coldplay, while their aggressively mellow approach places them in the same vein as Travis. However, Keane's style is more delicate and pop-oriented than Coldplay's, and their songwriting is less tentative than Travis, who always played their cards too close to the vest for my taste. Perhaps Keane's greatest asset is the bold simplicity of their approach. Their sincerity allows them to achieve the big chorus or crescendo without sounding blatantly commercial or overly derivative.

Keane delivers soaring ballads, up-tempo pop rock, and smooth midtempo numbers with equal facility. Upbeat, catchy tunes such as "Bend and Break," "Everybody's Changing," and "Can't Stop Now" grab the listener immediately; you'll find it impossible not to sing along after the second or third listen. Exquisite ballads like "Somewhere Only We Know" and "Bed-shaped" achieve lofty and romantic heights, avoiding sappiness and sentimentality by a hair's breadth. For variety, Keane slides into a late 70s-style soft rock sound (10cc and Gary Wright come to mind) on the atmospheric numbers "Sunshine" and "Untitled 1."

Singer Tom Chaplin sings beautifully and passionately in both full voice and falsetto. Keyboardist Tim Rice-Oxley resists the temptation to fill the guitar hero's role, instead providing solid chordal support with a few tasteful excursions into synth leads. Drummer Richard Hughes delivers steady rhythms throughout.

Keane aren't as ambitious as some of their contemporaries, and this is not a particularly challenging set of songs. But that's OK: they aim to please, and they succeed in doing it. "Hopes and Fears" is an auspicious debut and one of 2004's most pleasant surprises.



Pablo Honey ~ Radiohead

★★★★☆ **Solid first effort remains a curio in the Radiohead oeuvre**, February 3, 2005

The alternating bars of 12/8 and 11/8 that drive "Pablo Honey's" opening track, "You," should have given some indication to the masses that Radiohead would not be forever content to dwell in indie rock's lo-fi world. Though a solid debut effort, "Pablo Honey" gives little indication that Radiohead would go on to influence an entire generation of bands (Coldplay, Travis, Doves, Keane, et al).

"Pablo Honey" is most famous for the hit single "Creep," a simple post-grunge pop song completely atypical of the Oxford quintet's style. In fact, the song was never originally intended for the album. As the story goes, Thom Yorke had written it years before and was strumming it in the studio, when a passing record exec heard it and insisted on including it on the record. The rest is history, as they say. Though "Creep" ranks among Radiohead's least distinctive songs, it did put them on the music world's map, for which we should be eternally thankful.

Beyond "Creep," only a few songs stand out: "You" with its driving odd meters; the heartfelt ballad "Thinking About You;" the energetic "Ripcord;" and the dynamic "Stop Whispering," which starts as a catchy pop tune but builds to a ferocious crescendo that foreshadows Radiohead's evolution towards more complex arrangements. "Pablo Honey's" performances and production values are solid but lackluster, and may disappoint those expecting the studio wizardry and technical virtuosity Radiohead would go on to achieve on "The Bends," "OK Computer," and "Kid A."

All in all, "Pablo Honey" is a decent record, far overrated by the indie mavens who disowned Radiohead after they went "art rock," and unlikely to satisfy those more familiar with their later, more progressive work. It's a worthwhile debut, but remains a curio in Radiohead's increasingly impressive and accomplished oeuvre.



Sketches of Satie ~ Erik Satie

★★★★★ **Haunting and hypnotic**, January 9, 2004

"Sketches of Satie" is a collection of Erik Satie's compositions for piano, rearranged and performed by Steve Hackett (guitar) and his brother John (flute). The songs translate so well to flute and guitar, it's hard to believe they weren't originally composed for these instruments.

Fans of early Genesis won't be surprised by Hackett's virtuosity; the revelation here is John Hackett on flute. John's playing is so natural and fluent, it seems almost divinely inspired. On the first six tracks (Gnossiennes 3, 2 and 1 and Gymnopédies 3, 2 and 1), Steve provides subtle and steady accompaniment, allowing John's flute to handle the melodies. The next three tracks (the "Pièces Froides") highlight Steve on guitar, but John rejoins him for the rest of the album. The performances exhibit a hypnotic, haunting, and exotic beauty. Steve Hackett again demonstrates why he's one of the world's best and most versatile guitarists; by ceding the spotlight to his brother, he exhibits admirable modesty and restraint.

You don't have to be a fan of Satie or Hackett to enjoy this - just someone who enjoys gentle instrumental music that stimulates the mind while calming the soul.



Live ~ Genesis

★★★★☆ **Power instead of polish**, December 24, 2003

Many remember Genesis live shows as Broadway-esque affairs with laser light shows, smoke machines, medleys and Phil Collins in chinos shaking his tambourine. Those were certainly fun, but in the early days Genesis concerts were an altogether different beast. I'm not old enough to have experienced them, but "Genesis Live" offers a tantalizing snapshot of the band's performances from the Peter Gabriel era.

Gabriel was best known for wearing bizarre costumes during Genesis concerts, to illustrate the whimsical characters from his lyrics (the old man of "The Musical Box," the title character of "The Return of the Giant Hogweed"). The cover gives you some idea of the visual aspect. More importantly, you get the music - a rawer, more energetic brand of progressive rock than that presented on "Seconds Out" or "Three Sides Live."

The song selection isn't perfect, mainly due to the time constraints of the vinyl era. Most notably absent are "Supper's Ready" and "Can-Utility and the Coastliners." But you get a representative sample of songs from "Trespass," "Nursery Cryme" and "Foxtrot." While the live versions remain essentially true to the studio versions, the band infuses the music with new levels of energy, particularly on "Watcher of the Skies," "The Musical Box," and "The Knife."

"Genesis Live" is a great introduction to the band's early years. In terms of running time, it's less generous than the band's subsequent live albums. But in its ability to capture the power of Genesis live, it's unmatched.

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