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Review samples from UndressMeRobot  
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Written 2006, Compiled 2008

### The Young Knives: Voices of Animals and Men

Recently released in the U.S., the Young Knives' debut *Voices of Animals and Men* has already become something of a hit in England, following in the footsteps of other post-punk influenced U.K. bands like Futureheads, Art Brut and Franz Ferdinand. Like those groups, the Young Knives have hit upon a solid sound which, much of the time, wouldn't sound out of place on a 1978 John Peel playlist. The angular guitars and mechanical rhythm section recall the *Pink Flag/Chairs Missing* incarnation of Wire. In fact, Knives singer Henry Dartnall's snotty, cockney voice tics replicate Colin Newman's almost too closely.

However, *Animals and Men* is a bit more than a simple rehash of the standard post-punk blueprint. Many current influences come into play as well, most obviously Modest Mouse. To deliver the hectic verses of haunting lead single "The Decision," Dartnall utilizes the throaty lunatic warble often employed by Isaac Brock, except without the lisp. And, like most Mouse albums, *Animals* is massively front and back loaded with a drab, dragging middle section. The first five tracks, including the massively catchy and unusually-structured opener "Part Timer," are wholly excellent and astonishingly tight. "In the Pink" is a particular standout, with its creeping, bouncy guitar and bass lines combined with metronome drumming and exclamatory vocals.

Bookended by the hollow, too conventional British singles "Here Comes the Rumour Mill" and "She's Attracted To," the middle section sounds like it was made by a band still unsure of itself. "Tailors," despite having a reasonably interesting melody, comes off as an unfinished excuse to make use of unusual studio effects. Boring, too, is the 1 minute 39 second "Half-Timer," a plainly bad attempt at poetic mope-rock most likely influenced by Wire's equally ineffective spoken-word experiments.

The final part of the album makes up for the short comings of the middle section. "Dialing Darling," *Animals'* finest song, is driven by furious stop-start high hat work and perfectly contrasting duel vocals. "Another Hollow Line," evokes Talking Heads' slinky, early ballads. Closer "Tremblings of Trials," is possibly the Knives' most affecting song, with a subtly jerky rhythm and melody, not to mention the album's best set of lyrics, with legitimately poetic lines like, "We come undone in foreign parts / Our home is heavy in our hearts."

The Young Knives still have a way to go before distinguishing themselves as a standout band. Hopefully, on future releases, they will transcend

their influences and make some truly unique sounds. They certainly have the instrumental and songwriting talent to do so.

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### **Pony Pants: live at Garfield Artworks, Pittsburgh PA, Sept 27, 2006**

Despite the drab, plain, bomb-shelter vibe of the venue, Philadelphia dance-punk band Pony Pants managed to put on a fairly decent show at Garfield Artworks last Wednesday night. The crowd of friends and straggling local fans chattered in hushed voices as dark red mood lights washed over the stage. Soon the band walked on unassumingly, shrugged, picked up their instruments and launched right into a set consisting of a few new songs and the whole of their first album, *'Till Death Do Us Party*.

Pony Pants consists of yelping, authoritative singer Emily K, and the long-haired, bearded Ellis brothers: Ryan on guitar and Steve on guitar or bass, depending on the song. To round out the sound, the pre-programmed synth and drum machine serve as the "forth and fifth members," forming the inventive, insistent backing for the Ellises' intertwining, metal-influenced guitar riffs and Emily K's riot grrl-inspired vocals.

Opening song "Sexual Pickle," from *'Till Death*, made for a good, dance-worthy, Le Tigre-esque opener and gave the audience their first glimpse of the band's unconventional onstage profile. Barefooted Emily, in a plain tank-top and jeans, was dancing around with the abandon of a schoolgirl in her bedroom. The Ellises, in clothes, style and attitude, seemed every bit like members of a thrash-metal band, looking down at their guitars while simultaneously tossing their respective cascades of hair around like bundles of dirty whips. All of this, along with the band's strong proclivity toward wild flailing, made for quite a magnetic show. It was impossible to ignore the crazy people at the end of the long, white, concrete room.

Despite their stage presence and endearing back-and-forths with the audience ("You guys are smelly, Pittsburgh kids need to do their laundry," quipped Ryan Ellis), some bits of the show fell flat. Some of the new songs, like "Baby Got Backwards Skate," emphasized their metal tendencies a bit too much, making them sound like a female-fronted Megadeth cover band. The band also seemed generally encumbered by their equipment. Constant need to readjust the synthetic instruments held up the momentum of the set. Not only that, but the Ellises seemed to be dying to bust out with more intensity and spontaneity than the drum machine would allow. Emily K, despite her strong performance on the album, sang out of key for most of the show, her concentration (or lungs) possibly ruptured by too much jumping around.

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### **The Rapture: Pieces of the People We Love**

It's immediately obvious that the new Rapture album, *Pieces of the People We Love*, is a deliberate departure. Opening track "Don Gon Do It" is a jaunty burst of Top 40 dance-pop. With its searing synths and middle-eastern-influenced chorus melody it sounds like it could be the new Beyonce' single. That is if Beyonce' was actually four skinny white guys from Brooklyn.

What the band has done is take the disco-to-punk-ratio of its last album, *Echoes*, and flipped it on its head. Gone are the dirty, sloppy guitars intertwining with bounding bass lines. Suddenly appearing is an abundance of percussion (synthetic and) and an overload of synth accents. All that's left are the rhythms, a liberal amount of cowbell, and the Prince-meets-Tom-Verlaine yelp of singer/guitarist Luke Jenner. And Jenner's more exuberant howls are kept in check by tighter melodies and several more lead vocal turns by bassist Matt Safer.

Safer, it seems, has taken a bigger creative role in the band as of late. Much of *Pieces'* new subtlety and melody can be traced back to "Sister Savior," an anomaly on *Echoes* and the only song the bassist sang. Safer, Jenner and the rest of the band have taken what made that song so appealing (the synthpop artificial bass, the infectious soul melody, the subtle-but-heart-wrenching key change in the bridge) and scattered and spread those elements throughout *Pieces*.

All of this adds up to a much tighter, mature, and, most importantly, FUN album. This record, with very little effort, will instigate an impromptu dance party in your living room (this reviewer knows from personal experience). After the delicious shallowness of the opening track, the band gets down and serious. The title track, produced by Danger Mouse in one of his two guest spots, boogies to deceptively spare instrumentation until all the tiny bits of synth bloop and guitar pepperings gradually gather and culminate in the infectious "na na na" chorus. There are a few more big party tracks, including lead single "Get Myself into it," Jenner's sex-fueled "The Devil" and Safer's sarcastic "Who! Alright-Yeah... Uh-Huh," where he mocks immobile Rapture fans in a disco-diva whine: "People don't dance no more/They just stand there like this/They cross their arms and stare you down and drink and moan and piss/... ready girls?"

*Pieces'* best moments, however, come with the last three tracks, where they most successfully blend their new, clean, dance style with their old rock sensibilities. "Down for so Long" brings back the old rollicking drum-and-bass patterns of old songs like "Heaven" and "Echoes" and pairs it with a modest, shimmying and soul-inflected melody. "The Sound" still sounds punk, but it's a trancy, synth-spitting kind of anarchy. The closing track, "Live in Sunshine," has the band making an unexpected turn into

80's psychedelia, sounding like a sort-of robot XTC.

While past fans of The Raptures chaotic, dirty sound may be disappointed, it seems likely that many will continue to follow the band through this and the myriad of changes to their sound that are sure to occur in the future. The Rapture has always been mainly a fun, dance band, and seems unlikely that they'll stop delivering the goods on that anytime soon.

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### **United 93**

"United 93" has a lot to live up to. So much has been discussed, speculated and mythologized about the events on that flight that it's hard to imagine any filmmaker doing anything other than taking the easy way out. But British writer/director Paul Greengrass ("The Bourne Supremacy," "Bloody Sunday") has constructed a realistic portrait of the passenger's struggle that also happens to be a legitimately solid thriller.

The film functions as one big build, starting with the relatively mundane atmosphere the morning of Sept. 11 and culminating in the crash of United Flight 93. The viewer is kept taut throughout by hand-held camera and quick cut style. The tension begins to build with only the simple knowledge of what is about to happen, which the film exploits with a somewhat heavy-handed score. Nonetheless, things are squeezed tighter as the confusion heightens. It's frustrating to watch the miscommunication between multiple air control bases and the military/government system. The characters in the control rooms are hopelessly trying to put together a barrage of disparate information when the first tower is hit.

Brilliantly, the scenes of the outside world's reaction to the attacks are contrasted with the insular, sterile world of the airplane, where the four terrorists are still eyeing each other, deciding when to make their move

It would have been simple (not to mention more politically correct) to make a movie that painted everything in black in white: the terrorists as deformed, snarling, bearded creatures and the passengers as fearless, hair-gelled all-American Supermen. It might have been a huge crowd pleaser to have Todd Beamer (David Alan Basche) leap out of his seat and exclaim "LET'S ROLL" before leading his fellow passengers to the front of the plane and gallantly kicking down the cockpit door. Greengrass, fortunately, does not give in to the temptation of such a guaranteed hit cop-out. On the contrary, the film gives equal screen time and realistic humanization to everyone on the flight, including the terrorists.

The film's main emotional strength is that it builds your attachment to the

characters with only the events at hand. One might expect sympathy to be built with long-winded flashbacks or scenes of passengers sharing life stories. Greengrass refuses to cheapen the plot that way. There are, however, brief scenes of passengers calling home and saying goodbye to their loved ones which are constructed in brief snippets and pile on emotion with amazing economy. Just like in real life, there's too much fear and confusion for anything more.

Much of the acting is also solid and gripping. Credit must be given to Khalid Abdalla, who gives a standout performance as terrorist pilot Ziad Jarrah. His apprehension is tangible in the opening hotel scenes. Spine-tingling looks of discomfort cross his face as he's seated next to his future victims in the airport terminal. In these and later scenes on the plane you can feel Jarrah's apprehension and fear take him over. He can almost be seen reaching inward and grasping the last threads of determination from his twisted belief system.

"United 93" has proven that with good construction and solid performances a compelling, respectful, and (most importantly) honest film can be made from the events of 9/11. It's a pity that Oliver Stone didn't take a few hints.

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### **Man Man: 3/22/08 at Mr. Small's, Pittsburgh**

In a 2006 interview with Pitchfork Media, Man Man frontman Honus Honus, being asked about crowd reaction to his band's extraordinarily intense live performances, said, "Nobody talks to me after shows... I don't think I just give off the kind of vibe where anyone wants to talk to me. I'm usually soused after we play, too... you put it all out there, you're not really worried about looking like a jerk or not."

Honus may think he looks like a jerk, but the lack of approachability is a small price to pay for the visceral abandon that makes him the focal point of one of the most monolithically awesome live bands in modern indie rock.

At their Pittsburgh show last Saturday, March 22, at Mr. Small's Theater in Millvale, the five men of Man Man; Honus Honus (vocals, keyboards, various trinkets), Pow Pow (drums, percussion), and multi-instrumentalists Sergei Sogay, Critter Crat and Chang Wang, never once spoke to each other or the audience. Instead, they preferred to cut the bullshit and never let up, pumping out a solid hour of manic, dense, melodic carnival hobo-core. Shambolic yet precise, the obviously well-rehearsed band needed barely to look at one another to immediately transition from song to song. Synthesizers, clavinetts, bass guitars, euphoniums, sousaphones, pots, xylophones, pans, saxophones, melodicas, electric guitars, trumpets and even a Zube Tube appeared in the band's set.

Various instruments were grabbed and just as soon disregarded, often within the same song. Band members were often required to manically search for instruments that had earlier been thrown about the stage in the throws of performance.

And their song choice was superb, pushing down and letting off on the intensity with the effortlessness of a seasoned band in its prime. The set was culled mostly from their most recent album, 2006's *Six Demon Bag*. *Bag* favorites such as "Banana Ghost," "Engwish Bwudd," and "Black Mission Goggles" were peppered with first album gems like "Lebra" and a couple of tracks from their forthcoming album *Rabbit Habits*. Members of Man Man have often spoken in interviews of their dedication to keeping up the flow in their live performances, which may be the reason so many of their slower songs were noticeably absent. For the encore, however, the band closed with a ballad, their best song, the beautifully stark "Van Helsing Boombox." Honus' voice was shot from an hour of hysterical caterwauling. But his inability to hit all the notes didn't hurt the song's haunting flow. The crowd helped him out by belting every word.

For their part, the crowd, composed of wide-eyed high-schoolers and old-time indie fans in addition to the requisite twenty-something hipsters, absolutely ate it up. Wild waltzes and crazy jigs proliferated throughout. The front rows undulated as Honus, temporarily dressed in gold sparkly shawl and headband, jumped up from his seat to stalk the crowded stage, hopping on stools, keyboards and unused drums.

Opening band The Extraordinaires, also from Philly, only made Man Man look better by completely copping their style. They played a similarly Tom Waits-inspired set of folksy rock and sea shanties. The lead singer overdid it with the bug-eyes, although he did have a totally sweet marine-styled custom guitar that looked like a shark, or possibly a narwhale.