

'High Fidelity' mirrors bad love song

BY KENLEY YOUNG
GAMECOCK CRITIC
☆☆☆ OUT OF ☆☆☆

If you've seen one movie starring John Cusack, you've pretty much seen them all — or so the saying goes. Indeed, outside of his critically acclaimed role in Steven Frears' "The Grifters" and his recent turn as a twisted puppeteer in Spike Jonze's "Being John Malkovich," that adage isn't too far off the mark.

But take a cursory romp, if you will, through Cusack's impressive catalog of movies (stopping briefly to admire gems like "The Sure Thing," "Say Anything" and "Grosse Pointe Blank"), and one thing will become perfectly clear — not an actor alive can play a young, disaffected, disillusioned wince-ass quite like Cusack.

The moral? Being typecast hasn't exactly been detrimental to Cusack's career, nor has it prevented him from turning in fine performances. In fact, with the exception of the beloved "The Breakfast Club," "Say Anything" is the smartest teen romance that the '80s ever churned out.

With director Frears back at the helm in "High Fidelity," Cusack is at it again, this time as Rob Gordon, owner of a humble record store in Chicago that sells music mainly on vinyl. The movie opens with an emotional breakup between Rob and his long time girlfriend, Laura (Iben Hjejle).

In his search for answers, Rob examines and narrates his rocky love life to the audience, talking to the camera (big surprise) and airing his laundry as if we're all supposed to care. And by movie's end, we do. That's what Cusack does best.

Top Five lists figure prominently in Rob's life, as he rates everything from top five breakups to top five dream jobs to top five songs to play on a Monday morning. His mind, it seems, operates only in simple ordinals and classifications, a glaring indication that Rob is stuck in that nebulous limbo between adolescence and adulthood. He's not ready to accept responsibility for his life.

Dick (Todd Louiso) and Barry (Jack Black) are Rob's only employees at Championship Vinyl, and their form of refreshing comedy is a welcome foil to Rob's brooding. Louiso and Black craft their characters by adopting the attitudes of the same pretentious college radio snots we've all met (Come on. Everybody knows at least one). Dick is the quiet, annoyingly sensitive fount of useless information about bands you'll never hear, either because they're subversive of the mainstream or they just plain suck. Barry is the loud, annoyingly arrogant fount of useless information about bands you have heard of and would love to forget. They have one thing in common — their opinions matter; yours don't. Both portrayals are hilarious and dead-on accurate.

The movie seems a lot longer than it is, perhaps because Cusack has a knack for never-ending dialogue or because his "top five" theme becomes a tiresome gimmick. We've seen this before from him, and we've seen him do it better.

But it is, undeniably, a delight to watch Cusack



work, to see him take on the role of Everyman with such brutal honesty. That's where "High Fidelity" succeeds. It is an honest glimpse into the life of a vulnerable, confused, immature male who desperately wants to grow up, in spite of himself. Best of all, Cusack's Everyman isn't always morally upstanding. In fact, he can be downright depraved. But he is unflinchingly honest. Always.

Cusack's character exhibits the same type of morally questionable behavior that every male is guilty of, but no male will admit. And that's why guys relate to him.

At the very least, see "High Fidelity" for its star-spangled supporting cast, including Lisa Bonet (whoa!), Joan Cusack, Sara Gilbert, Tim Robbins, Lili Taylor, Natasha Gregson Wagner and Catherine Zeta-Jones.

BY PETER JOHNSON
GAMECOCK CRITIC
☆☆☆ OUT OF ☆☆☆

John Cusack has been one of America's most endearing actors since the early '80s, so it was a little difficult at first seeing him play a snobby record store owner with a girlfriend who dumps him because of his apparent mistreatment of her.

In "High Fidelity," Rob Gordon (Cusack) is living in Chicago as the owner of Championship Vinyl. After a particularly painful breakup with his girlfriend, Laura (Iben Hjejle), he rationalizes that he needs to go back and review his most painful breakups and the reasons for each of them.

He recounts them in the form of a top five list, similarly to the way he discusses music with his fellow record store employees, the timid and quiet Dick (Todd Louiso), and the hilariously rude Barry, played by Jack Black of Tenacious D.

Cusack's character doesn't seem like such a likable guy at first. He runs down the list of his top five most painful breakups, and in the ensuing flashbacks you find yourself pitying him. But these breakup accounts are simply his view of the rela-

tionships.

As Gordon gets in contact with each of the exes on his top five list throughout the movie, he comes to the realization that some of these painful splits were blatantly his fault. His problem with maintaining a relationship with a woman is due mainly to his deep-rooted fear of commitment and lack of maturity in the matter. Once he starts to think back on these past relationships, he realizes that some of the more hurtful ones were the ones that were the smartest to end.

He reevaluates and reorganizes his thinking much in the same way that he is simultaneously reorganizing his massive record collection from alphabetical to chronological.

In his quest to find out why women love to break up with him, Gordon discovers that there really are valid reasons for his getting dumped. Gordon decides that he loves Laura, who had been wooed away by upstairs neighbor, a pony-tailed, sushi eating Tim Robbins, and attempts to repair his relationship with her.

Jack Black steals the show in the scenes he's in with his incessant mistreatment of customers and endless criticism of his coworkers' tastes in music. He's even in a hysterical music cameo, singing Marvin Gaye's classic "Let's Get It On."

"High Fidelity" is one of those movies that will have music fans recognizing those abstract songs, pointing out familiar record covers to their friends and marveling at the depth of Gordon's record collection. And many will end up admiring how his perception on life and love has changed chronologically, as has his record collection.

BY ROBERT FLEMING
ASSISTANT ENCORE EDITOR
☆☆☆ OUT OF ☆☆☆

The standard love and loss tale is given a whole new sound with "High Fidelity." Fidelity explores the world of romance and the trials and tribulations that occur with it. And while this is a popular

topic in most movies right now, this is not another "Empire Records." "High Fidelity" deals with the more mature aspects of relationships and not the teenybopper sappy stuff.

What sets this movie apart from most love gone bad and come back again films is the soundtrack. Unlike its younger siblings, Fidelity uses music to convey feelings and emotion almost like it was another actor. The choices of songs have an integral part in the film and are not selected to try and sell an album in Sam Goody. Also, the obscure nature of the selections combines the best in old and new artists that are often overlooked by most, unless you're a music junkie or work in a record shop.

The film is incredibly well written, combining just enough humor and wit to keep it from being very depressing, but not so much that it's a slap happy comedy. This script is acted wonderfully by the ensemble cast. John Cusack delivers a great performance as the less than admirable Rob. Iben Hjejle also displays the same talent in playing his girlfriend, Laura. More of the comedical aspects of the film are because of the presence of Todd Louiso and the insanely brilliant Jack Black. Tim Robbins also adds to the humor of this film, but I don't think it was intentional.

"High Fidelity" throws out the gauntlet to the moronic love sap that fills up our multiplexes. The outstanding mixture of romance, comedy and music make this film one that deserves some attention. Sure it won't be the best film you see this year, but it definitely won't leave you with a bad song stuck in your head as you leave the theater. And that's definitely worth the price of admission to me.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TOUCHSTONE PICTURES

(Above) Rob Gordon (Cusack) and Laura (Hjejle) try to save each other and their relationship. (Top) Gordon, Barry (Black) and (Louiso, center) have little or no patience for customers (Tim Robbins, right) who aren't in the groove.