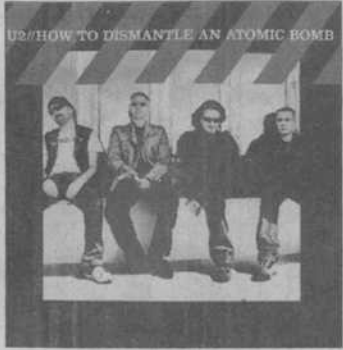


CD REVIEWS

'Atomic Bomb' packs arena rock punch



U2/HOW TO DISMANTLE AN ATOMIC BOMB

By MEG MOORE THE GAMECOCK

With a name like "How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb," U2's latest release couldn't be anything but epic. Together for almost 30 years,

Bono and the boys from Ireland have journeyed to "Where the Streets Have No Name" and back again, turning out stadium-ready rock since "New Years Day."

By mixing socially conscious lyrics with sweeping sonic statements, U2 has garnered both critical and public acclaim throughout their career — a rarity in the pop rock world. Finding play on MTV as well as on indie-rockers' iPods, the supergroup remains one of the few bands able to win a divergent mix of listeners.

On their latest effort, U2 proves that practice can make pretty-near-perfect when it comes to producing hits. Recapturing the overall feel of 2000's Grammy-winning "All That You Can't Leave Behind," the lush rock of "How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb" sounds tailor made for fist-pumping fans.

Partnering with Apple to promote the new album, the lead single and

opening track "Vertigo" is currently being featured in a commercial, and the band has lent its name to a special edition iPod. Fans can also purchase U2's entire catalog via iTunes.

But all of this corporate sponsorship doesn't trump the fact that the group has again turned out one rockin' album. From the catchy chorus of "Vertigo" to the '80s-tinged splendor of "City of Blinding Lights," U2 is gearing up for another "Beautiful Day."

Working with Steve Lillywhite who produced the band's debut LP, "Boy," U2 strikes a balance between the grandiose and the mellow with cuts such as "Miracle Drug" and the heartrending "Sometimes You Can't Make It On Your Own." The pairing of Bono's soaring vocals and The Edge's unmistakable guitar makes for a -near-spiritual experience. When Bono sings "Listen to me now / I need to let you know / You don't have to go it alone," it's with the power to

convert souls.

"Atomic Bomb" never explodes with anything earth-shattering, but for a band that has finally found its stride, simply swaggering in can be enough. Making music with untouchable confidence, the group contemplates love, death and war while calling for peace, all within an 11-song span. After almost three decades of rock, Bono et al. reserve the right to deliver something comfortable, if still masterful.

Those who have looked to U2 as something more than the pinnacle of arena-rock may be disappointed by their latest release's lack of sonic exploration. But for those who have anxiously awaited another reason to scream and sing-along, "How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb" packs enough uplifting moments to keep fans believing the hype.

Comments on this story? E-mail gamecockfeatures@gwm.sc.edu

Natalie Portman retains mystery

Actress holds on to vulnerable quality while playing stripper

By HANH NGUYEN KRT CAMPUS

In Mike Nichols' relationship drama "Closer," Natalie Portman — whose poise and talent often makes her seem older than her years — has finally come into her own as an adult actress.

Based on the award-winning play by Patrick Marber, "Closer" revolves around the lives of four strangers who meet, love, betray and ultimately ruin each other while seeking intimacy. Despite playing a stripper in the film, the 23-year-old "Star Wars" prequel actress insists that she doesn't feel fully mature.

"I don't really feel like an adult yet myself, so I don't really think I can play adults. I think it's always a proportion, adult to child within you, and even when you're 85 you're still going to have that proportion," explained Portman. "It changes with mood and with time. It's an arbitrary distinction between adult and child."

Director Nichols, who previously worked with Portman for a stage production of "The Seagull," specifically wanted this curious mix of youth and sophistication for the role of Alice.

"I wanted to start with a beautiful young girl, so adorable that Audrey Hepburn would worry ... And then (later in the film) Natalie comes back and she's increased," Nichols said.

Alice changes over the course of several years in the film, beginning as a charismatic pixie-like waif who captures the attention of obituaries' journalist Dan, played by Jude Law. After experiencing a bitter betrayal, she inevitably becomes wiser and jaded, yet still keeps an intriguing untouchable aura about her. Marber, who adapted his play for the screen, also sees this quality in Portman.

"She's extremely clever. She's got some secret about her as truly intelligent young women always do," gushed Marber. "She's enigmatic. She's absolutely in the now and she's real. She's quite a one."

Portman maintains her mystery when it comes to nudity as well. For the strip club scene, she agreed to let the film roll while she bared herself, but later decided against using the two-second shot of her closing her top.

"I didn't think it was crucial to the scene. I thought it was distracting, if anything, to have it at the head of the scene," she said.

Nichols, who describes the film as "not about showing anything," agreed to the cut, a decision that must have pleased Marber, who deliberately kept all of his characters clothed, albeit scantily at times, for the stage version.

"It's very important to me that there's no nudity in the play because it's all about words and the words we use," he explained. "I wanted the audience to always feel like they'd seen all this sex, but they haven't seen a damn thing, if that makes any sense at all."

In fact, Portman and her co-stars Law, Julia Roberts and Clive Owen make it through the movie discussing and reacting to sex, but never participating in anything more passionate than a heated gaze or kiss on screen.

Of course, as Alice, Portman ratchets up the eroticism with her strip club scenes, for which she took pole dancing lessons, which she describes as "physically very demanding, a combination of dance and acrobatics."

Although she gained a new respect for the strength and stamina of exotic dancers, Portman didn't have to perform anything quite so taxing. Having taken dance lessons since the age of 4, she performs an effortless split in the film. "I'm extraordinarily flexible," she commented matter-of-factly.

Her garb for the scene consists of a G-string, skimpy top, garter and colorful wig. Despite this provocative ensemble and her even more suggestive actions, the actress doesn't worry about her imminent status as a sex icon.

"I'm not scared. I'm brave," she said. "I'm not doing things to prove anything that I'm like or unlike what other people think of me. That makes me comfortable with whatever people walk away with. I can still carry on my own life without being hurt."

"Closer" opens nationwide today.

Indie Christmas album offers new take on tunes



MAYBE THIS CHRISTMAS TREE

By MEG MOORE THE GAMECOCK

When you consider the relatively few number of Christmas songs that make it onto popular CDs, it's a wonder that every year so many more holiday albums get released.

Honestly, a good number of remade classic simply don't work — Fleetwood Mac's version of "Silent Night," for example, may just be the most grating Christmas song ever produced.

But if the popularity of pop holiday albums this year is any indication, the Christmas album offerings at any given music store will soon start to rival its Pop-Rock selection.

Moving beyond the mainstream take on seasonal tunes, "Maybe This Christmas Tree" gets lesser-known stars in on the seasonal action. Including tracks from The Ravonettes, Death Cab for Cutie and The Polyphonic Spree, among others, the compilation delivers an early gift to those looking for yet another, out-of-the-ordinary collection of holiday hits.

With its numerous members, The Polyphonic Spree seems tailor made to revamp the John Lennon classic "Happy Xmas (War is Over)." Maintaining and even strengthening

the original tune's exultant sound, the group invigorates the seasonal favorite with lush choral arrangements and orchestral accents.

The Ravonettes follow with a percussion-driven, jingle bell-tinged take on "The Christmas Song," carrying the melody with vocal harmonies.

Making the most of Ben Gibbard's distinctive vocals, Death Cab for Cutie wanders wide-eyed through "Christmas (Baby Please Come Home).

Yet the holiday spirit soon begins to sag. Although wonderfully ironic, melancholy offerings from Pedro the Lion ("I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day") and Tom McRae ("Wonderful Christmastime") put a damper on the cheer. And the garbled strings and muffled vocals of Ivy's "Christmas Time is Here" sound anything but celebratory. Exercising one's creativity is one thing, but, well, it is the holidays — sacrificing depression for "Deck the Halls" wouldn't hurt.

The record's strongest tracks remain those that place the actual song above the artist's lets-see-what-I-can-do ego. Jars of Clay's James Taylor-esque rendition of "Christmas for Cowboys," a tune made famous by John Denver, stands out. Sparsely instrumented, the song has a warmth and authenticity no amount of artistic license could better.

With other gems such as Royal Crown Revue's jazzy "Baby It's Cold Outside," Lisa Loeb's groovy take on "Jingle Bells" and Belasana's "Bittersweet Eve," the album has its season-saluting moments.

"Maybe This Christmas Tree" may not be the most consistent holiday CD out there, but it gives indie music fans a way to celebrate without having to endure a Clay Aiken Christmas.

Comments on this story? E-mail gamecockfeatures@gwm.sc.edu

'Finding Neverland,' 'Kinsey,' 'Closer' honored by National Board of Review

By CHRISTY LEMIRE THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — "Finding Neverland," the whimsical, wistful story of "Peter Pan" creator J.M. Barrie, topped the National Board of Review's list as the best film of 2004.

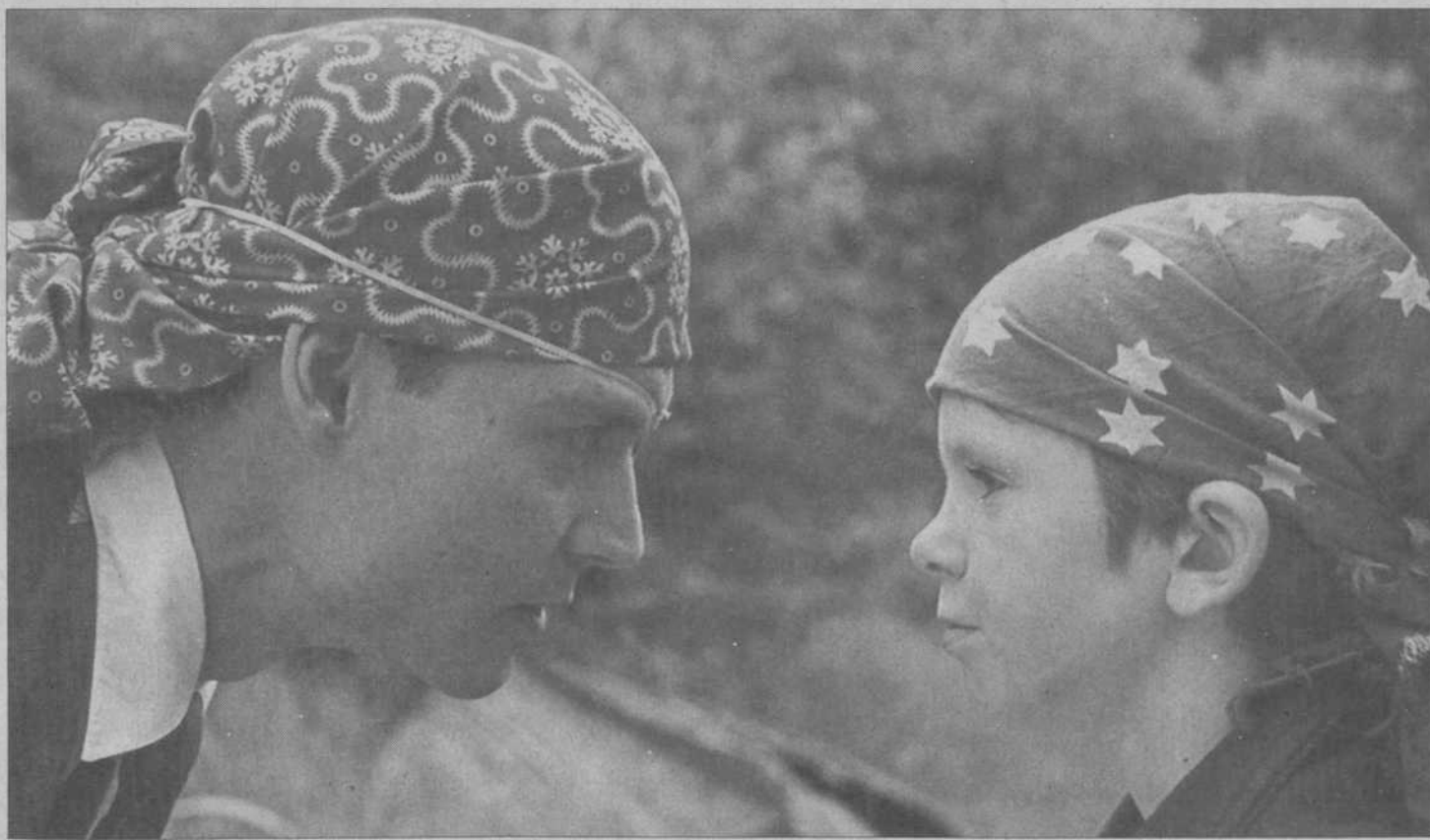
Jamie Foxx was named best actor for his convincing portrayal of Ray Charles in "Ray," and Annette Bening took the top female acting honors for "Being Julia," a showy role in which she plays an aging British stage star.

No single film dominated the group's winners, announced Wednesday, although "Sideways," about best friends on a wine-tasting road trip, was honored in three categories: Thomas Haden Church won the supporting-actor award for his role as a swaggering, washed-up TV actor; director Alexander Payne and his writing partner, Jim Taylor, shared the adapted screenplay honors; and the film was listed among the group's 10 best of the year.

Laura Linney won the supporting-actress category for "Kinsey," in which she plays the wife of sex researcher Alfred Kinsey. The cast of "Closer" — Jude Law, Julia Roberts, Clive Owen and Natalie Portman — were honored for best acting by an ensemble.

The Pixar hit "The Incredibles," about a family of super heroes, was named best animated feature. "The Sea Inside," a Spanish film starring Javier Bardem as a quadriplegic fighting for his right to die, was the top foreign language film. And "Born Into Brothels" was the group's choice for best documentary.

Michael Mann won the best-director award for "Collateral," starring Tom Cruise as a hit man on the prowl in Los



Johnny Depp and Freddie Highmore star in "Finding Neverland," picked as the best film of 2004 by the National Board of Review.

Angeles, and Clint Eastwood received special filmmaking achievement honors for the boxing drama "Million Dollar Baby," which he directed, produced and stars in, and for which he composed the score.

The group's top 10, in order: "Finding Neverland," "The Aviator," "Closer," "Million Dollar Baby," "Sideways," "Kinsey," "Vera Drake," "Ray," "Collateral" and "Hotel

Rwanda." The No. 1 choice of "Finding Neverland," starring Johnny Depp and Kate Winslet, came as no big surprise to Tom O'Neil, host of the awards handicapping Web site GoldDerby.com.

"The board traditionally likes movies based on real-life characters — movies with literary credentials based on real-life characters, like 'The Hours' and

"Quills," O'Neil said. "And they have certainly demonstrated that they have a profound impact on the Oscars," he added. "They put Halle Berry on the map with 'Monster's Ball.' Berry's win at the National Board of Review was the only major industry award she won in the Oscar home stretch."

The organization doesn't always jibe with the eventual Academy Award

winner. In recent years, the National Board has chosen "Mystic River," "The Hours," "Moulin Rouge" and "Quills," none of which won the best-picture Oscar. In 1999, however, it matched up with the Oscars, picking "American Beauty."

The National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, formed 95 years ago, is composed of film historians, students and educators.

CHRISTMAS

Continued from page 6

from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. The Carolina Country Cloggers and the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church Step Team will provide entertainment.

PRE-KWANZAA CELEBRATION

Sunday from 2-4 p.m. at the Sarah Nance Cultural Arts Center, 2611 Grant St.

USC CONCERT CHOIR ANNUAL HOLIDAY CONCERT

Sunday at First Presbyterian Church, 1420 Lady St. 6 p.m. Free.

HOMES FOR THE HOLIDAY

Tour nine decorated homes in the Shandon and Hollywood-Rose Hill neighborhoods. Sunday from 2-6 p.m. Tickets are \$10 in advance and \$15 the day of the tour. Call Sam Waldrep at 779-5343.

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

The Shandon Chancel, Columbia College Choirs and the S.C. Philharmonic will perform Sunday at the Shandon Presbyterian Church, 607 Woodrow St. 3 p.m. Free.

GIFTS FOR INPATIENT CHRISTMAS PARTY

The Palmetto Health Baptist and Palmetto Health Richland Hospitals are seeking volunteers to buy Christmas presents for those remaining in the hospital over the winter holidays. Santa will distribute the gifts a few days prior to Christmas. Call Carole Howell at 434-4517.

Movie Releases "Closer"



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