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## EW review: Mraz's 'A-Z' too verbose

By Chris Willman  
Entertainment Weekly

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(Entertainment Weekly) -- On his platinum debut album, Jason Mraz sang, "I'm all about the wordplay." He was too fond of that throwaway self-definition to let it go, because he repeats the line -- builds a whole song around it, actually -- on his sophomore effort, "MR. A-Z" (as in M-R-A-Z ... get it?).

In "Wordplay," he fancies himself "the wizard of oohs and ahs and fa-la-las" and offers himself mad props, declaring "It's time to get ill, I got your remedy" (as in his breakout single, "The Remedy" ... get it?). Words continually spill out in cocky, melodious torrents, as if Mraz were operating under the maxim that he who dies with the most vowels wins.

He's not the first Wordy Wordpecker to come proudly down the pop pike; Dylan and Costello



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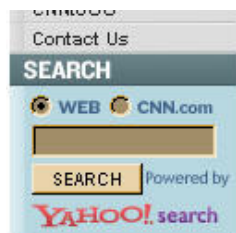


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proudly down the pop pike; Dylan and Costello didn't exactly stint on selling lyrics by the volume either. But if previous generations' motormouths were full of vinegar, Mraz just wants to whisper sweet nothings in your ear -- lots and lots of sweet nothings.

In a come-on called "Geek in the Pink," our cunning linguist further establishes ironic street cred ("I may be skinny at times/But I'm fat full of the rhymes") before moving in for the kill: "Hey baby, look at me go from zero to hero/You better take it from a geek like me/I can save you from unoriginal dumb-dumbs/Who wouldn't care if you come ..." Remember when nerds, as a beleaguered social caste, required revenge? Now not only have they inherited the earth, and the summer reality-show TV schedule, they're beating bullies to the G-spot.

If you're going to identify yourself as a geek, it helps to have innate talent and sexual allure. With his trucker caps and "I [Heart] Sex" buttons, Mraz has already established himself as probably the most callow of the new brainiacs -- adult-contemporary-leaning twentysomethings who you'd guess graduated cum laude from gifted-children programs, with minors in ADD. (See John Mayer, Nellie McKay, and Fiona Apple for the best in breed.) Most of these smarties have some soul, but it's hard to pinpoint where Mraz's resides exactly amid the hubris.

It's not in a mawkish ballad like "Plane," where, at jet altitude, he serenades the girlfriend he just left behind, basking in an erotic afterglow even wind shears can't curtail: "Honey, I can see your house from here/If the plane goes down/Damn/I'll remember where the love was found." Jason, if the plane goes down, you'll be screaming like a little girl, just like the rest of us.

But if many of his overheated lyrics crash, let the black box show that even his most banal efforts are ridiculously hummable.

"Geek in the Pink" has a faux-funk hook to make Maroon 5 green with envy. As frenetically

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"Geek in the Pink" has a faux-funk hook to make Maroon 5 green with envy. As frenetically acoustic numbers go, "O. Lover" could be Rob Thomas and Santana's lost collaboration, and "Clockwatching" more than marks time as a nifty marriage between Mayer and Dave Matthews, to name-check producer Steve Lillywhite's former client.

On the midtempo rock front, "Did You Get My Message" suggests someone's been listening to Jellyfish, while "Please Don't Tell Her" sounds like Rufus Wainwright straightening himself out to front an emo band.

The latter song, the album's best, is the only one where Mraz drops the boasting, folkie-hip-hop affectations, pillow talk, and pep talks long enough to explore complex emotions and admit to being a problem wunderkind.

Who knows? If Mraz ever gets past being so self-impressed, he might even, one day, become truly impressive.

*EW Grade: C+*

### **'Grown & Sexy,' Kenneth 'Babyface' Edmonds**

*Reviewed by Channing Joseph*

If you can get past his incessant clichés ("sometimes the grass isn't greener ...") and inexplicable compulsion to break into a strained falsetto, Babyface's music on "Grown & Sexy" is as catchy as ever. Though none of these sexed-up love ballads and sickly sweet sentimental ditties has the classic sound of 1989's "Whip Appeal," smooth new sing-alongs like "Mad Sexy Cool" and the irresistibly groovy "Tonight It's Goin' Down" make this CD perfect for grown folks who want to ... well, get sexy.

*EW Grade: B+*

### **'Hustle & Flow,' Soundtrack**

*Reviewed by Michael Endelman*

Just like the ghetto-centric film it's attached to, the appropriately crunked-out "Hustle & Flow" soundtrack is slightly offensive and occasionally amateurish, but in the end, it'll move you. Showcasing the cranium-shattering beats of Southern hip-hop, it's a useful primer on the scene, featuring tracks from both major players (T.I., Mike Jones) and less familiar names (P\$C, Al Kapone).

*EW Grade: B*