



Common: so fresh and so lean

Common Get It

With Kanye's help, the rapper is all that he can Be. **by Raymond Fiore**

COMMON

Be (GOOD/Geffen)



Rap ambition is so often manifested by bloated and mediocre double-disc "events" that Common's 11-track gem might seem positively meek by comparison. Oh, but how the hip-hop hit-erati could learn from his example: The Chicago MC's sixth CD is 43 minutes bursting with street-smart, warmhearted (but not corny) goodness.

Common's never released a subpar effort, so his capacity to create compelling work is hardly surprising. However, *Be*'s leanness (missing from 2002's intriguing yet overreaching *Electric Circus*) signals awesome growth even without pushing sonic boundaries. And we can partly credit fellow Chi-town native and this year's Grammy golden boy

Kanye West (who's releasing the disc through his own Universal imprint and oversees all but two of the cuts) for Common's renewed focus: The marriage of the MC's conscious rhymes to West's gritty, boho-inflected production boasts more organic freshness than a Whole Foods Market.

Indeed, with the exception of the soggy, sunny-clichéd "Love Is..." *Be* achieves a jazzy, Native Tongues-like complexity that still resonates on ghetto corners. Whether cleverly narrating a courtroom drama on "Testify," glorifying hood dwellers on the Coltrane-feeling reverie "Real People," or celebrating monogamy on the irresistible, D.J. Rogers-sampling "Faithful," Common favors accessibility over abstract experimentation. And who cares if *Be* isn't groundbreaking? As West's label name promises, this is simply GOOD music. **A-**

Pop/Rock

GORILLAZ

Demon Days (Virgin)



To his credit, Blur's Damon Albarn—the auteur behind pop's finest cartoon band since the Archies—didn't want to rehash the sardonic sleepy-time dub of Gorillaz's 2001 self-titled left-field hit. With *Grey Album* producer Danger Mouse at the knobs, the follow-up is spookier, blippier, and more on edge. It's also not as cohesive. Some of the guest turns (De La Soul on "Feel Good Inc.," Happy Mondays frontman Shaun Ryder on "DARE") work; others (Dennis Hopper's narration on "Fire Coming Out of the Monkey's Head") are one-listen experiences. Tailor-made for iPod pruning. **B** —DB

AUDIOSLAVE

Out of Exile (Interscope)



On their unexpectedly strapping debut, Audioslave took more cues from Soundgarden than Rage Against the Machine, the bands in which their members once



served. The same is true of that CD's successor: *Out of Exile*'s opening tracks, "Your Time Has Come" and the title song, ride the wild alt-rock beast as if they were *Superunknown* outtakes. But despite the enduring force of Chris Cornell's lungs and looser moments like "Doesn't Remind Me," the album ends up in the same

spinning-wheels muck that often bogged down Soundgarden. Nineties nostalgia has its limits. **C+** —DB

WALLFLOWERS

Rebel, Sweetheart (Interscope)



Rebel? Please. Jakob Dylan's poppier-than-ever rock band isn't rising up against anything. Instead of musical mutiny, we get a slickly produced, radio-friendly collection of almost love songs with downbeat lyrics ("Happy birthday to the war...") and upbeat guitar riffs (think Hanson, but all grown up). Still, with catchy cuts like "Days of Wonder" and "The Beautiful Side of Somewhere," this CD could just drive the Wallflowers back home to the top of the charts, one headlight or not. **B** —Channing Joseph

SHOUT OUT LOUDS

Howl Howl Gaff Gaff (Capitol)



There's not much shouting, and there's nothing particularly loud about these endearing Swedes. Whether buoyantly baring bipolarity on "100 Degrees" ("I'm so happy, oh so happy/Then again, I'm always sad") or pining for lost love on "Please Please Please," singer Adam Olenius brings a scratchy fragility to these 11 urgently peppy toe-tappers. While the merry melodies are as warm as the guitars are fuzzy, *Howl Howl* seems more an elegy than a joyous salvo—but at least you can dance to it. **B+** —Timothy Gunatilaka

ALKALINE TRIO

Grimson (Vagrant)



Matt Skiba is an atypically smooth-voiced crooner for a pop-punk band

COMMON: CASS BIRD; AUDIOSLAVE: ETHAN A. RUSSELL