

Alex Chilton doesn't live up to early standard on latest release 'Set'

By Shelley Mika

Staff writer

Do you like good pop? Not manufactured pop like that of Britney Spears and the Backstreet Boys that's played so often you really do want to be hit one more time (so as to be put out of your misery).

What I'm talking about is honest to goodness pop; music that comes from the soul but doesn't take 850 listens to palate (or to understand for that matter).

If so, Alex Chilton is a man to be familiar with.

Though you may have never heard of him, Chilton is the king of this genre. Since his breakthrough in 1967 at the age of 17 with the Box Tops, Chilton has managed to produce numerous simple yet soul-searching tunes.

In 1970, after the split of the Box Tops, Chilton went on to form the more impressive but under-appreciated band Big Star, in which Chilton's true talents as a musician flourished.

As a tried and true fan of Big Star, I had high expectations for Chilton's latest album "Set." Though Chilton's career has been left by the wayside, much like Big Star's and even the Box Tops' were, it seemed certain that his part-grit, part-sweet, part-sexy voice could never disappoint.

And it hasn't, for the most part. "Set" starts with the typical Chilton vocals and charmingly simple lyrics he's known for with "Never Found a Girl" ("You're a poor man's dream/And a rich man's prayer/But I don't need money honey cause you're always there") and "Lipstick Traces" ("Lipstick traces/On a cigarette/Every memory lingers/With me yet").

Chilton's poppy yet original guitar riffs make their way from the '70s onto these tracks as well. So far so good; the core of Chilton remains, with some fresh tunes to sing in the shower. And then something happens. It's not bad, but definitely not Chilton. With "You's a Viper," Chilton looks

beyond his roots and goes for more of a Sinatra-esque vocal style. It's not that Chilton suddenly sucks or anything. Rather, it's painfully obvious this isn't a Chilton song. Prior to "You's a Viper," the songs fit, with simple lyrics and catchy tunes that escape the feeling of selling out. But the lyrics of "Viper" are so out of Chilton's dialect that it feels out of place.

Immediately following is "I Remember Mama," and later, "Single Again," which would seem more at home on a Wilco album than that of a Big Star alumni.

From there, Chilton experiments with his jazz sentiments on "April in Paris" and "There Will Never Be Another You," neither of which are bad, but neither of which are particularly striking, either.

For the rest of the album, Chilton wavers between styles but finally redeems himself with the final track, "Goodnight My Love."

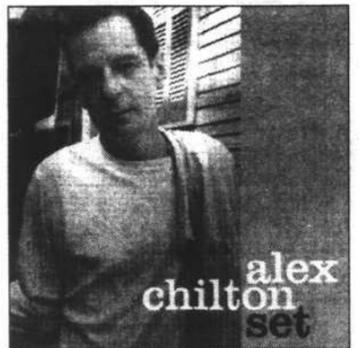
Don't get me wrong. If Alex Chilton wants to fool around with dif-

ferent genres, he's free to do so. But it's a little less credible when checking out the credits, only to find that Chilton didn't write any of these songs. He takes credit for production and direction, but no nods go to him for any individual songs.

Maybe that's why this album fails to reincarnate the underground pop spirit Chilton so expertly evokes in his earlier music.

It's a huge disappointment that Chilton, who once recorded an incredible song he wrote at age 13, has now officially turned his talents over to the artistic explorations of others. "Set" manages to be a good album to hum along to, but not to take very seriously. Undoubtedly, Chilton has put his own spin on a few songs and made them successful, but on the whole, "Set" fails to accomplish what Chilton is (or at least was) capable of doing.

If you're a Big Star fanatic and want more, "Set" will satisfy at least a few of your cravings. But if you've never heard of Alex Chilton but like indie



Alex Chilton

TITLE: Set
LABEL: Bar/None
Records:
GRADE: B-
FIVE WORDS: Listen to Big Star instead.

music, on which Big Star had a huge impact, don't buy this CD.

Instead, do yourself a favor and buy a Big Star album.

'Black and White' takes a different, meandering look at pop culture, leaves questions

By Samuel McKewon

Senior editor

Watching James Toback's "Black and White" is to witness a pop-culture volcano erupt unmitigated. There's rappers playing rappers, rappers playing gangsters, models playing students, a pretty baby playing a filmmaker, Bijou Phillips playing a pretty baby and Mike Tyson playing himself.

It is, then, quite a good thing that Toback's medley of stories all portray a rift in the pop culture this movie immerses itself in — specifically the hip-hop culture of black America and its gradual embrace by white suburbia.

Long thought of as the Hunter S. Thompson of the film industry, Toback offers no genuine revelations on the status of race relations; rather, he takes what is known, or thought to be accepted, and shoots at it from an alternate direction. Or improvises it.

In other words, his is a drug-addled, 45-degree approach — a mix of scathing

and straight-faced. Unfocused and loose-fitting, "Black and White" is an incomplete picture with motivations not fully known and conclusions purposely left undone — much unlike the cynic-friendly, catchier brethren that holds "American Beauty" as a charter member.

The result is a hodge-podge of multi-racial dramas — ones I'm not entirely sure could exist in real time — about where the pop pulse is and who's on it. And in Toback's vision, the hip-hop of New York calls the shots with a little help from Tyson, in a strange and effective cameo.

There's enough movie bait for three movies, but a few major players emerge, and most of them move through the life of music producer/gangster Rich Bower (rapper Power and member of the Wu-Tang Clan), who's introduced in the first scene as the male protagonist between two white girls in a Central Park threesome.

One of the groupies (Phillips) heads home to luxury, complete with black butlers and quail dinners, where she talks smack to Daddy and plays phone tag with male callers. Later, she admits to a teacher her whole lifestyle is a transitory phase: "I'll get over it. I'm a kid in America."

Bower's entourage grows larger to include college basketball star Dean (Allan Houston), who's about to walk into a point-shaving sting employed by a cop (Ben Stiller) looking for redemption. Model Claudia Schiffer is Dean's girlfriend, Greta, an anthropology student whose ideas of manhood leave casualties in their wake.

On the periphery are the white wannabes, who stake out the NYC wall to prove their loyalty to the black code. One brother tandem (Eddie K. Thomas and William Lee Scott) are particularly involved.

And much of it is caught on tape by documentary filmmaker Sam Donager (a game Brooke Shields), while her

obviously gay husband (Robert Downey Jr.) tags along and has a too-close encounter with Tyson.

The plot evolves in bits and pieces, until everyone is eventually thrown together. Plot devices are hardly the point, though — "Black and White" cares not about a driving story. Characters are dropped and added along the way. Not the point. Toback's vibe is.

The movie is all feel, and individual scenes contain hilarity and truth, though not necessarily connected with scenes before or after. Tyson's appearances — he has three major ones — take on a life of their own, especially in an encounter with Power's character, who asks for advice.

Free-form verse, courtesy of Wu-Tang Clan member Raekwon, provides the movie's key monologues, filmed voice-overs, if you will. And Shields' hand-held camera images provide the second filter of the film — an even higher intensity from the whites who yearn

Black and White

STARS: Mike Tyson, Power, Ben Stiller, Brooke Shields, Robert Downey Jr.
DIRECTOR: James Toback
RATING: R (language, threesome sex scene)
GRADE: A-
FIVE WORDS: "Black and White" has vibe.

to get close to blacks.

"Black and White" bursts with too many ideas to stay without flaw. There are useless tangents and subplots. The ending is abrupt. Greta makes choices that the script cannot justify. The film seems content, even obligated, to leave some motivations unexplained, maybe because they cannot be explained.

As Tyson says, "It's an age-old tale — deceit and treachery." "Black and White" plays that self-awareness out to its very end — that in pop culture, a few lines can sum up the entire story.

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