

# LEFT OF THE DIAL



**Muse**  
*Black Holes & Revelations*  
(Warner Brothers)

I had a conversation with a photographer a while back, during which he remarked, "I'm not a photographer. I'm an artist." As I tried to keep from laughing out loud, I wondered whatever happened to the days when you had to earn the right to be a pompous ass. Muse is a band that performs like that photographer talks. Its fourth record, *Black Holes & Revelations*, is a bloated slab of progressive and alternative rock, a document of a band drowning in its own egotistical discharge. By combining seriously derivative tunes with 10th-grade, anti-establishment poetry, Muse is trying its damndest to be important and wearing it all too obviously on their sleeves; they weren't being ironic by putting "revelations" in the album title. The opening track, "Take a Bow," may be the best example of this unhealthy addiction to melodrama. Opening with an ambitious, 3/4, synthesizer arrangement straight out of *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, the track beckons with impending darkness and musical boldness, until singer Matthew Bellamy starts belting out the first of many rudimentary lessons about how war is bad. "You must pay for your crimes against the Earth," Bellamy emotes in his trembling, tortured tenor. This heavy-handed angst overwhelms an otherwise promising tune—the wasted potential is heinous. From this point forward, almost every song is produced into oblivion, and every time the group's "muse" is a little too clear, whether it's the Cure ("Starlight"), Queens of the Stone Age ("Supermassive Black Hole"), U2 ("Invisible") or Depeche Mode ("Map of the Problematique," which is "Enjoy the Silence" as a regurgitated mess). Excessiveness like this used to be synonymous with rock stardom; if you weren't over-the-top in some way, you were the Eagles. These days, we like our rock stars simpler and safer. It's tough for a band to strut around with an air of theatrical self-importance without looking stupid, especially when they don't have the chops to back it up. I can see what Muse is going for with *Black Holes & Revelations*—a crossover alternative rock album that is both glossy and revolutionary, a record that will have critics raving and young suburbanites shelling out their allowances. Unfortunately, the band got lost in its own hubris and has left us with an incredibly glossy turd.

—joe sweeney



**Razorlight**  
*Razorlight*  
(Universal)

"The songs on the radio sound the same/Everybody just looks the same," gripes Razorlight singer/guitarist Johnny Borrell on "In the Morning," the leadoff single from the his band's sophomore full-length. Careful there, guy! After all, you're not so far off from being guilty of sameness. Borrell and his band are following 2004's *Up All Night*, the saucy but somewhat stock garage-rock debut that split shiny, dueling guitars and heavy backbeat with relationship paranoia and a party-time comedown vibe. The results made for something akin to Pulp's Jarvis Cocker fronting the Strokes. It was a lot of fun and proved them one of the brighter lights among England's current crop of bands, but hardly showed them too be reinventing the rock lexicon. So maybe it's just a little tough to listen to a lad bemoaning homogeneity when he's arguably part of the problem. Maybe he doesn't see things that way. On the self-titled second album, Razorlight are certainly out to make a break from the pack. It's a moderately ambitious album inasmuch as it seems they were out to make a lyrical, mature statement while at the heart

craft an unpretentious, poppy record. Along the way things get a bit garbled. "In the Morning" is the perfect opening bouncy gem, all fun and charm. "Who Needs Love?" follows as a jaunty, piano-fueled, blissful goodbye to romance, while "Hold On" revels in Motown-inspired rhythm and glee. I'd always heard the cheekiness of aforementioned Jarvis Cocker in Borrell's swaggering vocals. Now I'm getting a healthy twinge of the trembling Irish tenor of Undertone Feargal Sharkey, particularly with "Fall to Pieces," where Borrell implores a jilting lover over a panicky guitar line. So I'm really liking this record...and then I start to hear the downsides. Borrell's outsider statement on "America" completely derails a song already dully dragging in mellow, mid-tempo-ness. "Los Angeles Waltz," another boring story/statement song that needlessly namechecks Kings of Leon, makes me wonder why all these cool English blokes repeatedly reference the USA, it's doing them no good. A cod-reggae beat at the core of "Back to the Start" is another one of Razorlight's weaknesses: Here's a mediocre song that is further troubled by a shifting tempo. When Razorlight isn't thinking too hard, they're really great, and this album soars in those moments of lithe, uncomplicated, semi-confectionary pop rock. There's unfortunately just enough lead tethering this album to the ground to keep it from going too far and too high.

—donny kutzbach

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