

Sliding into his first album

■ 'Slider' Cleavant Derricks shows versatility and potential in his album 'Beginnings'

By Aaron Shakra
for the Emerald

When an established actor turns to a career in music, there's a certain stigma attached to whatever he or she creates. While Jennifer Lopez or Keanu Reeves can use music as leverage for their stardom, many other "low-profile" actors' attempts at musicianship are usually perceived as overindulgent celebrity tripe, then promptly laughed away to the used CD bin faster than anyone can say Marky Mark.

Perhaps this is the reason that the present-day Cleavant Derricks remains shrouded in such obscurity. In late 1999, the "Sliders" star and Tony-award winning actor turned to a musical career and released his debut album "Beginnings." Now, nearly two years after its release, the musician and album remain largely unknown and unheard.

Derricks' role on "Sliders" provides some interesting context for his turn to music, because during his five years on the series, he portrayed a Motown soul singer named Rembrandt "Crying Man" Brown. Remmy's song repertoire included "Tears On My Fro" and "Cry Like A Man," and it's clear that some of his influence has carried over into "Beginnings."

That influence is not dominant, however. On "Sliders," Derricks simply sang the songs, whereas on "Beginnings" he is responsible for both the music and lyrics (along with the help of Aaron "Vain" Jones, who collaborated with Derricks on a few of the tracks and contributed one of his own). The result is music ground-



ed in R&B and soul traditions.

Yet labels or genres shouldn't determine the demographic of the listener, because Derricks' singing has an inherent beauty transcending all musical boundaries. His greatest strength lies in his ability to reveal his perspectives with honesty and heart. Even in "Better Get Off Of Me" — lyrically the most straightforward track — the inflection of his voice makes it an absolute joy to listen to, especially toward the end of the chorus, when he warns "You better."

The album opens with "Cruisin' L.A.," which faithfully creates a bittersweet, sentimental mood for life's simpler moments, such as the seemingly endless freedom of driving with no given destination while one's favorite music is on the stereo.

The listener can appreciate some of the music's underlying themes without even having to hear the songs. His portrait on the album cover is an expressive summation of "Beginnings" intentions: Serious yet humorous, sentimental yet relevant, honest while remaining downright bad-ass. The cover photo seems to portray a natural Derricks expression and is likely from a photo session that consisted of no more than 30 seconds of studio time.

The highlight of the album is "Pain In the Walls," in which Derricks

urgently wails, "Caught in a habit/Searching for truth/Price of admission/The cost of your youth." Later, in a manner reminiscent of the Brian Eno/David Byrne album "My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts," a possessed Derricks yelps, "Help me somebody!" — reflecting his desire for listeners to hear his message that it's "all not lost."

Rather than including any "Sliders" staples (likely in high demand from the fans of the series), Derricks has wisely chosen to distance himself from his signature role. Instead, he speaks about Rembrandt Brown from the third-person perspective in the reflective "Remmy's Slide."

While these days it's not unusual to hear many popular songs consisting entirely of loops, sampling and overdubs, such concepts aren't inherently bad. The production team of Gail Johnson, Aaron "Vain" Jones and Peter Love make use of such techniques, giving the music a full, emotional sound to support Derricks subtly, without overpowering him. The sampling mostly consists of live instruments; horn, wa-wa guitar and bass abound. When there's a drum machine, it's used sparingly and tastefully.

Derricks' Web site (www.cdericks.com) indicates that he embraces all forms of music. Whether "Beginnings" is (as the name intends) the first in a series of albums from Derricks remains to be seen, but a proclaimed willingness to experiment and expand beyond set genres and divisions is probably one of the most exciting things any new musician could indicate. "Beginnings" is a superb start, and Derricks' mission as a musician has seemingly limitless potential.

Aaron Shakra is a freelance reporter for the Oregon Daily Emerald.

Resolution

continued from page 1

The resolutions, and the ideologies behind them, seem to be gaining momentum nationwide as legislative appropriations shrink. Schools in the Atlantic Coast Conference and the Western Athletic Conference are considering comparable proposals.

Backers of the resolutions, like University of Oregon English professor James Earl, are quick to point out they are not "just a bunch of nerds who don't like football." Rather, Earl said, they are interested in slowing the rapid growth of athletic programs because the programs are detracting from the educational mission of higher education.

"The path that we are now following ... already has led to a growing sense among members of the public — and even members of the community — that athletic success is the main goal of too many institutions of higher learning," Myles Brand, Indiana University president, said in a speech to the National Press Club. "We must get off that path. We must make certain that academic concerns are first and foremost. To do that, we don't have to turn off the game. We just have to turn down the volume."

One way to turn down the volume is to limit corporate exposure in college sports by reducing the number of pauses in games for commercials and by scaling back the number of logos displayed by athletes and coaches, resolution backers say.

But University of Oregon Athletic Director Bill Moos said reducing

corporate revenue for college teams would trim funding that athletic departments depend on.

"Institutions have continued to lessen their degree of funding for intercollegiate athletics programs," Moos said. "That has forced us to be innovative in finding ways to fund our programs. (Corporate sponsorships) have become a major portion of the funding model for intercollegiate athletics."

Another demand of the resolution is for universities to rescind athletic subsidies in order to control the "arms race" of athletic facility building on college campuses — and thereby force athletic departments to live within their means. The University of Oregon Senate recently agreed to such an arrangement with intercollegiate athletics.

"Faculty everywhere are of a single mind on this issue," said Earl, an original planner of the Pac-10 joint resolution. "The most important thing I'd like to make clear to the public — including students and fans — is that they understand faculty are not opposed to college athletics, per se. We just want to slow the growth in the future."

Earl said there is a growing dichotomy between athletics and academics that must be bridged, beginning with students and student athletes. The resolutions also suggest that academic support systems for athletes, such as tuition waivers and tutors, be integrated into schoolwide efforts.

"I don't agree with that," Moos said. "Student athletes have a lot more demands on their time than normal students. There are exceptions — there are students that work and non-traditional students

— but with plans and practice time and other parts, a student athlete's life is different than that of the ordinary student."

Jon Sanders, a policy analyst for The Pope Center for Higher Education Policy in Raleigh, N.C., said many groups — including "academic purists" and "feminists" — have pushed athletic reform ideas for years. But that probably doesn't mean much to athletic conferences near the southeastern corner of the country, he said.

"I think it would face an extraordinarily tough road," Sanders said. "There are so many people out there not involved in a university — alumni, supporters — who enjoy the games and don't care to be bothered with the issues behind them. That's not just to blame them. College athletics drives a lot of revenue for colleges, especially successful ones."

Pac-10 presidents examined the athletics resolution and have said that while they believe in the viability of the athletic system, they also said the problem of the "arms race" would be addressed.

Earl said reforming athletics policies will take a substantial amount of time, but after talking with University of Oregon President Dave Frohnmayer, he said the resolution is high on Frohnmayer's list of priorities.

"We're in the middle of a big campaign for a stadium and have a team on the way to one bowl or another," Earl said. "It's not the time for expressing these differences of opinion."

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