

Networks aim for 'reality'

Reality shows regularly have been one of my pet peeves, and they always have been an easy target for the media, with shallow people mugging for the camera and playing stupid, shallow games.

It was easy to poke fun at the "Survivor" contestants who were obviously hoping to jump-start



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acting or modeling careers, and no effort was required to predict the downfall of civilization from the horrid influence of the increasingly upped ante on the game-show-style programs.

That is, up until now.

The next generation of reality shows has hit the small screen, and instead of offering a titillating view of fresh-scrubbed young bodies, the new wave gives viewers a peek at society's institutions. Some of the shows are decent, one is great, and the trend is a refreshing change from the stupid human tricks and gross-out fests that make up "Dog Eat Dog" and the ridiculously named "Mole 2: The Next Betrayal."

The networks started things off with "The Hamptons," ABC's horrible attempt in early June to document the lives of the nation's elite as they loved, lived and laughed. Actually, it might not have been the attempt that sucked, so much as it was the people who sucked. If what was portrayed is the American Dream, I'll never sleep again.

Next came, "Boston 24/7," ABC's six-part look at, as their

Web site proclaims, "an American city and the people who make it work." This mid-June show was halfway decent, but it was mostly soap opera and what felt like staged interviews.

Then came the best of the bunch, ABC's "State v." Do you notice a trend here? ABC is on the leading edge of the new wave, and as the networks fight over reality viewer share, television audiences win. "State v." (Wednesday, 10 p.m.) takes an inside look at court cases from three angles: the defense preparations, the prosecution preparations and — here's the new part — the jury deliberations.

I recently served jury duty and saw the setup for a manslaughter drunken driving case, so it's exciting to see a jury in action. It's especially exciting to see them arguing and thank my lucky stars that I wasn't subjected to such torture.

The best part about "State v." is its even-handedness. On the first episode, the director showed both sides with equal force, and I was genuinely unsure about the outcome. Contrast this with the latest in NBC's "Law & Order" stable of programs, "Crime & Punishment" (Sunday, 10 p.m.). In the first episode, the audience is beaten about the head and shoulders with the opinion that the accused is guilty of murdering his ex-wife, despite the fact that there is no physical evidence.

Instead of showing both sides of the case and cutting the footage together neatly to mimic the "Law & Order" formula, the audience is served pointless "intermission" scenes of the prosecutor relaxing with a glass of wine while he repeats to his friends all of the non-evidence he presented in court. I didn't have a problem with the eventual guilty verdict, but the biased portrayal made me throw

things at the screen.

The latest entrant (because I simply refuse to discuss Fox's "American Idol") is "Houston Medical," ABC's real-life version of "ER." Problem is, I know "ER." "ER" is a friend of mine, and "Houston Medical" is no "ER."

Instead of compelling dramatic interplay between the characters (which might have seemed corny, but I could have lived with it) and nail-biting emergency room procedures, audiences are given pro-hospital propaganda and gleaming portrayals of hard-working doctors. I'm sure most doctors are hard-working and flirtatious; after all, who doesn't feel a little randy in the middle of surgery? But "Houston Medical" (Monday, 10 p.m.) almost comes off as an HMO infomercial. I found myself wondering, is there some health insurance vote coming up in Congress?

When considered as a whole, the institutional reality trend is certainly better than the squalor of "Road Rules" or "Fear Factor." Some of the shows are entertaining, and viewers may come away with a deeper understanding of hospitals and courtrooms.

But if you want to watch the best reality show currently airing, tune in to PBS at 9 p.m. today for "Frontline." This show is regularly the most compelling and unbiased news program on the air. And tonight's episode, "Shattered Dreams of Peace: The Road From Oslo," examines the Middle East conflict from the 1955 assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to the present. Now there's a topic about which Americans genuinely need to gain a deeper understanding.

Contact the editor in chief at editor@dailymerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Emerald.

Chumbawamba's latest: Simply Dumbawamba?

CD REVIEW

Album shows band is washed up

By William Mills
The Gamecock (U. South Carolina)

(U-WIRE) COLUMBIA, S.C. — Chumbawamba's latest release, "Readymades," is a dance album scattered with the ramblings of a once-great group of aging British anarchists. The album is chock-full of electronic beats driven along by mediocre vocals and lyrics.

"Readymades" sounds less like an album created by members of the early '70s Brit-punk scene and more like a soundtrack to a Japanese anime film. Also, the liner notes are littered with anarchist propaganda that expired three decades ago.

One thing that can be said for them, however, is that they do have admirable perseverance. "Readymades" is the group's fourth full-length release on a major U.S. label, and one of the few albums to not have a name like "Anarchy," "Criminal Injustice" or "English Rebel Songs."

Chumbawamba hit the U.S. dance scene with the release of "Tubthumping" in 1997, a song that reached No. 1 on the Billboard music chart. That presence culminated with "WYSIWYG," a release that was voted one of the worst albums of 2000 by USA Today. They do deserve some recognition for not totally retreating after such a reception.

However, even if "Readymades" was graded on effort, it would not rise above a "D."

Though the lyrics invoke and preach against all that is non-PC, they never touch the listener on an emotional or intellectual level.

"Readymades" is a death rattle for a group that began its slow demise after the release of its only American hit, "Tubthumping." These one-hit-wonders have dug a deep hole for themselves, and it will take a shovel a lot more dynamic than "Readymades" to dig up some record sales.

New CD is 'Readymade' for success

By Toni Bartone
The Pitt News (U. Pittsburgh)

(U-WIRE) PITTSBURGH — Chumbawamba's politically charged 10th full-length album may surprise those who remember this band only for the Super Bowl-friendly mega-hit "Tubthumping" from 1997. However, the radical flavor of "Readymades" is nothing new for these outspoken Brits.

True nonconformists, Chumbawamba departs from the catchy style of "Tubthumper" on "Readymades." Though the band has always dabbled with folk music, "Readymades" abandons infectious, shoutable choruses for a softer sound with more emphasis on lyrical meaning.

Walking a fine line between so-called sell-out pop musicians and DIY punks, the band has unapologetically criticized globalization and corporations, the British monarchy and the United States' war on terrorism.

"Readymades" employs electronic beats and haunting vocals to address specific issues. The lyrics fully describe the atmosphere of the larger issue they each refer to, and each song is explained in the liner notes.

The bottom line is that "Readymades" offers a comforting yet stirring soundtrack for those who seek change.

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Horoscope by Linda C. Black

TODAY'S BIRTHDAY (June 27). You're naturally good at accumulating things and holding onto them. But it certainly wouldn't hurt to practice. Learn about investments this year, and insurance, and the interest you're paying. Get rich.

To get the advantage, check the day's rating: 10 is the easiest day, 0 the most challenging.

ARIES (March 21-April 19) Today is a 7. Let somebody else take the lead. Show that you can be a team player. Support a friend who has a great idea, and you'll both win.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20) Today is a 6. If you can figure out what an older person wants, then provide it, you could earn a nice bonus. It's not easy, but it's probably something you've done before.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21) Today is a 7. Your success isn't due to sheer luck. It isn't exactly easy, either. It takes discipline. Show that you have what it takes.

CANCER (June 22-July 22) Today is a 6. The strain on your wallet can be relieved by taking on an extra job. Do something you used to pay to have done. Time can equal money, so if money's tight, spend more of your time instead.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22) Today is a 7. Do you know somebody who actually likes to do homework? The type who's always annoyingly correct? Ask that person to help you so that you can relax.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22) Today is a 6. Now comes the tough part. How do you solve this puzzle? Start by finding a little more patience. Then, find the directions. Then, read them. Again.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 22) Today is an 8. Time to go! You should be prepared by now. Blast out of the starting gate and leave the competition in the dust. Dazzle them with your brilliant yet responsible rhetoric.

SCORPIO (Oct. 23-Nov. 21) Today is a 6. The problem you're facing is your own damned fault. If you weren't so stubborn, you'd walk away. But, no, you want to have the best and save the bucks. No pain, no gain.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21) Today is a 7. You don't have all the answers yet, but you're getting closer. Shut yourself away in the library so that you won't be disturbed. Focus.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19) Today is a 6. You may be starting to get tired, but don't fret. The most difficult part is over. All that's left is the doing, and the raking in of the goodies. You can do that in your sleep.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18) Today is an 8. If it looks as if the deck's stacked against you, don't worry. You'll win through an amazing last-minute turn of events, maybe late tomorrow.

PISCES (Feb. 19-March 20) Today is a 6. Make plans and lists. Look ahead, and figure out what will be needed and how you're gonna get it. The more careful you are now, the easier it'll be later.

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