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CD Review: Album set charts progression of Oberst, Bright Eyes

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CD Review

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Bright Eyes
"Noise Floor(Rarities 1998-2005)"
Saddle Creek

While I usually frown on music collection releases, chalking it up to a lack of inspiration on the artist's part, "Noise Floor" is no "Greatest Songs of the Sixties by Barry Manilow."

While both were released late last month, Manilow's uninspired greatest hits record can't hold a candle to Conor Oberst and his band of traveling musicians. Frontman for Bright Eyes, the basement band turned international superstars, Oberst entertains fans with a collection of singles, unreleased tracks, collaborations and covers recorded between 1998 and 2005.

Recorded to cassette, four-track, midi-disc, reel-to-reel tape machine and computer, the album screams Bright Eyes. The scratchy recordings made in basements with friends chuckling in the background are all staples of Oberst's early recordings.

Two unreleased songs, "Sea-shell Tale" and "Weather Reports" and are enough to push fans and collectors to purchase the album, while early recordings of "Mirrors and Fevers," "Drunk Kid Catholic" and "Motion Sickness" give a glimpse into the progression of Bright Eyes' music.

"Mirrors and Fevers" begins the album much like the opening of a play. The crowd buzzes as they find their seats; the actors pace across the stage, singing their lines and smiling nervously at each other. Tidbits of a familiar song seeps through the noise: "I think you've lost what you've loved in the mess of detail."

As the background noise ceases, Oberst begins his awkward vocals, an enduring theme of Bright Eyes' music. "I was cold in a dream. Somewhere close to the surface. Between the ice and stream there's three inches of air," he sings. "Mirrors and Fevers" is a song from the EP "Don't Be Frightened of Turning the Page," precursor to "Fevers and Mirrors," the album that started Oberst's

path to fame.

Despite the popularity of "Fevers and Mirrors," Oberst went a different musical direction, releasing "Lifted or the Story is in the Soil, Keep Your Ear to the Ground" in 2002. Not only was this one of the longest titles since Fiona Apple's 57-word album title, it was a new path for Oberst. Politically driven lyrics and alt-country tunes would become part of the Bright Eyes family.

Jumping forward to 2003, a single from Lost Highway Record's "Lost and Found, Volume 1," continues to set a tone for the progression of Bright Eyes. "We've got no health insurance, no cellular service, no disease they can cure. But we need more money to burn so each person must learn the dollar amount they are worth," he sings in "Trees Get Wheeled Away."

"The Vanishing Act" takes a step back to 1999. In Elliot Smith style, the music is despondent. Each pass of Oberst's fingers on the acoustic guitar is defined in a minor chord. From the split single with The Books, "Too Much of a Good Thing is a Good Thing," "The Vanishing Act" is followed by "Soon You Will Be Leaving Your Man," a softer tune that appeared on the 7-inch, "Motion Sickness," in 2000.

The title track from "Motion Sickness" closes the album, wrapping up seven years of rarities. "I want to get myself attached to something bolted down so these winds of circumstance won't keep blowing me around. From when I land to when I leave, there's enough time to sleep and sing. I keep running around, and all I want is to lay motionless."

The next full-length release from Bright Eyes is slated for spring 2007.

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