

**Jane Siberry**  
 NEXT THURSDAY! DEC. 22  
 8:00pm • 21 & Over  
**THE BLACK ORCHID**  
 230 W. North Ave. in Piper's Alley • 21 & Over



**moe.**  
 VERY SPECIAL GUEST  
**THE DISCO BISCUITS**  
**FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 3 • ARAGON**  
 8:00pm • 18 & Over 1106 W. Lawrence  
 Tickets available at the Vic Box Office, 3145 N. Sheffield with no Service Charges



**MATISYAHU**  
**SATURDAY, MARCH 4**  
 7:00pm • All Ages  
*Riviera Theatre*  
 4746 N. RACINE AT BROADWAY & LAWRENCE  
 New album **YOUTH** available January 31  
**ON SALE THIS TUESDAY, 12/20 AT 10AM!**



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**RALPH'S WORLD**  
 All Ages Matinee at Noon

**TUESDAY DEC. 27** 7:30pm • All Ages  
**marc cohn**  
 SPECIAL GUEST: Danielia Cotton

**FRIDAY JAN. 20** 7:30pm • 18 & Over  
**DARK STAR ORCHESTRA**  
**RAISING THE DEAD**

**FRIDAY JAN. 27** **93XRT** 8:30pm • 18 & Over  
 SPECIAL GUEST: Jason Collett

**THE DEREK TRUCKS BAND** - Jan. 28  
**COLIN MELOY** - Jan. 23 • **AIMEE MANN** - Feb. 1

**the vic** *GENUINE DRAFT*  
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**DJ SKACHMO**  
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 WITH VERY SPECIAL GUEST  
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 ALSO APPEARING: **DOUG DOPPLER**  
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**BIG HEAD TODD AND THE MONSTERS**  
 Special Guest **JACKIE GREENE** **SATURDAY, JANUARY 21** **93XRT**  
 8:00pm • 18 & Over

**SUPERGRASS**  
 WITH SPECIAL GUEST **pilotdrift**  
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 8:00pm • 18 & Over

**POI DOG PONDERING** - New Year's Eve! Dec. 31  
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# The Meter

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## Keepin' It Really, Really Real

Kanye's cowriter on "Jesus Walks" wants to talk to you about regular folks.

By Bob Mehr

"This is my entourage," jokes Rhymefest as he walks into the Jefferson Park home studio of his friend Franco de Leon. He's accompanied by his teenage sister, his girlfriend, and a seven-year-old son from a previous relationship. "You know, all us hip-hop stars have a big posse." Wearing a navy blue mechanic's jumpsuit with RHYMEFEST printed across the front, the rapper otherwise known as Che Smith settles on the couch, takes a bite from a hoagie, and glances at the TV—it's tuned to BET, and *106 & Park* is doing a segment on Kanye West's *GQ* spread.

Smith and West have a long history together. Back in 2001 West contributed beats to Smith's self-released debut, *Raw Dawg*, and at the Grammys last February they shared the Best Rap Song award for cowriting West's hit "Jesus Walks." Smith doesn't yet have a major-label album himself, but his first, *Blue Collar*, is due in March, and he's been working on it at several studios, including de Leon's. The disc's lead single, "Brand New"—with production and a guest turn by West—was released to urban radio in the fall, and the video is already playing regularly on MTV and BET.

*Blue Collar* will obviously get a big boost from the Kanye connection, but Smith insists that the album can stand on its own two feet. He thinks of it as a concept record devoted to the day-to-day African-American experience, an antidote to bling-obsessed mainstream hip-hop—he does mention a Hummer, for instance, but it's driven by army recruiters targeting young black men. "If we went to the hood right now, you might not see any brothers on the corner selling dope, but you might see some people at the bus stop going to work," says Smith. "There's hardworking people that try to make ends meet that come home and have to deal with a drug addict in their family, or with children that's been molested, or with utilities that have been turned off. Hard times are something that great comedy has been made of. Hard times are something that great books have been made of. Why not great rap?"

Though he lives in Indianapolis now, the 28-year-old Smith was born in Jeffrey Manor on the south side and raised by a single mother. He started writing rhymes in the fifth grade and broke into the battle-rap scene while still a student at South Shore High School, developing a style that mixed the humor of Biz Markie, the singsong narrative flow of Slick Rick, and the rapid-fire delivery of Kool G Rap. After graduating he cut a few tracks with the Molemen—including a duet with rival and mentor Juice called "How We Chill," which became a Chicago club favorite in 1996. A year later he placed second in the Scribble Jam battle in Cincinnati, beating out Eminem.

By the late 90s, though, a change in circumstances had forced Smith to put aside the notion of a music career. Shortly after he enrolled at Columbia College to study radio broadcasting, he got his girlfriend pregnant. They married and Smith moved to West Lafayette, Indiana, where his new wife had been attending Purdue. Their son was born in 1998, and Smith worked a series of low-paying jobs—usually two at a time—to support the family. He managed to finish *Raw Dawg* nonetheless, and when his wife graduated and found work as a chemical engineer in Indianapolis, he was once again free to pursue



Rhymefest

music full-time.

He also began cultivating connections in earnest. Smith's friend Ron Miner, aka DJ Indiana Jones of Indianapolis hip-hop promoters Crush Entertainment, introduced him to New York turntablist and producer Mark Ronson, son of legendary David Bowie guitarist Mick Ronson. Smith appeared on Ronson's star-studded Elektra album *Here Comes the Fuzz*, joined him on a tour opening for Justin Timberlake, and in 2003 signed with his production company, Allido.

Smith had been generating underground buzz with a series of mix tapes like *Blue Collar Collection* and *A Star Is Born*, both released in 2004, but he became a hot commodity when Kanye West's solo debut, *The College Dropout*, became a breakout success—the biggest hit from the album was a reworked version of "Jesus Walks," which Smith had originally recorded for one of his own demos.

Since then Smith has taken some flak from folks who think he's just riding West's coattails, but he's philosophical about the detour his song followed to end up on the charts. "Look at it like this," he says. "I took it in to the record labels and they said, 'Is this what you think is hot on the streets? Is this what people want to talk about—Jesus walking? Security? Security, get these crazy people out of here!'" he says, laughing. "If I'd have listened to them, I'd have nothing. But the success of ['Jesus'] helped me get a record deal. I've been able to buy a house for my son and my mother and sister to live in. I'm blessed."

A number of labels, including West's GOOD Music, offered to sign Smith, but he stuck with Ronson and Allido. Allido hooked him up with J Records, an Arista imprint run by industry veteran Clive Davis. "I see a lot of the labels that throw something out, and if it don't stick they're like, 'Peace, see you,'" says Smith. "Clive

Davis is one of the last people in the music industry that develops artists."

Smith has spent much of 2005 working on *Blue Collar*, both at de Leon's place and at studios in New York, Atlanta, and New Orleans, collaborating with an impressive roster of producers—not just Ronson and West but Chicagoan No ID, the Miami team Cool and Dre, and New Yorker Just Blaze. Musically the album reflects his broad tastes—"I listen to Coldplay, the White Stripes, Franz Ferdinand, Nina Simone, Ella Fitzgerald, Robert Johnson," he says—but lyrically it's tethered to the blues. "I bite blues stuff all the time," Smith admits. "When you hear a blues song and they say, 'Love don't love nobody,' I take that and say, 'Love don't love nobody, drugs don't love nobody, so why we put that shit in our body? If not for somebody like me taking it and making that stuff relevant for today, nobody would. I have a sister that's 16 and a son that's 7 and they'd never hear it. They'd never know that tradition.'"

On Friday Smith will be one of the judges for an all-city MC battle at the Abbey Pub, and in the next few weeks he plans to shoot a video for *Blue Collar*'s second single. He's also working out details for an MTV special and a regular Rhymefest show on Sirius Satellite Radio. Expectations for the album are already running high, but he says he's not worrying about whether it will sell.

"I believe if you do what you love and the money don't come, then you still got love," he says. "If you reach for a feather too many times it's gonna keep floating away. But if you hold out your hands it'll land in them. I also believe inspiration comes from the creator. I didn't make 'Jesus Walks' and neither did Kanye. We were just used as vehicles to deliver it. So I'll just sit here and wait for the message and deliver the music that's given to me." □

# The Treatment

A day-by-day guide to our Critic's Choices and other previews

## friday16

**CC NIGHTMARE OF YOU** Nightmare of You front man Brandon Reilly has apparently found a Sam's Club in New York that sells fey, because he throws it around on the band's self-titled debut like someone who buys in bulk. He used to play guitar for the poppy emo band Movielife, and drummer Sammy Siegler spent time in Gorilla Biscuits, Glassjaw, and Rival Schools, but those punk roots hardly show—instead the boys gleefully tear fistfuls of pages from the most dandified chapters of Britpop history, packing every song to the max with world-weary irony, catty call-outs, and velvet-gloved come-ons. Reilly croons like Morrissey, or maybe like a hyperventilating, over-the-top parody of Morrissey, and the intro to "I Want to Be Buried in Your Backyard," with its gloomy bass progression and brittle icicles of reverbed guitar, is obviously ripped off from the Cure's "A Forest," but those are just two of the most blatant acts of theft on an album full of them—it'd be pointless to accuse such shameless plagiarists of stealing anything. And despite the foul and self-indulgent territory Reilly trespasses upon in his lyrics—fucking somebody in the bathroom of a club, fantasizing about car wrecks, wanting to be buried in some girl's damn backyard—the songs are crazily catchy. I tried to laugh these guys off when I first downloaded "Backyard," but in a week's time it was sitting on top of my iTunes most-played list like a cocky heavyweight champ. Oh, the shame. The (International) Noise Conspiracy headlines, Circa Survive plays second, and Nightmare of You opens. ▶ 7 PM, Beat Kitchen, 2100 W. Belmont, 773-281-4444, \$12. —Miles Raymer

## saturday17

**ATTIC RECORDINGS, NOTES AND SCRATCHES** The **NOTES AND SCRATCHES**, a quintet of members of the local Tense Forms art collective, has just released its own first CD, *Uh-Oh*. The credits list more esoteric instruments than a Gypsy pawn shop, but the nicely understated production lets them all bleed together into a hazy shimmer that gives "The Hours" and "The Cass Song" a palpable sense of ennui. Joshua Dumas's unfiltered-cigarette voice fits the mood well, as do his Raymond Carver-esque lyrics ("I'm tossing matchsticks into a teacup / They hiss and pop and go out," from "In the City of Eggtimers"). The CD comes in a plain cardboard sleeve with hand-printed cover art, a nifty minimalist touch. —J. Niimi

Until recently the **ATTIC RECORDINGS** were known as the Black Giraffe, and the quartet's new EP, *Village Down Below* (Mission Label), compiles some of the material they played under the old name. Slow-moving, slow-building, with swirling interlaced guitars, their dreamy and stretched-out songs reproduce the effect of staring into the middle distance without focusing on anything in particular... for hours. They're intricate and pretty, but they never give you a reason to care about them. —Monica Kendrick

This show is a release party for both bands. The first 50 people through the door will receive a copy of *Demons and Rare Meat*, a Mission Label compilation featuring tracks by the Dirty Projectors, the Octopus Project, Okkervil River, and Tunde Adebimpe of TV on the Radio. Pontius headlines, the Attic Recordings play second, and the Notes and Scratches open. ▶ 10 PM, Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western, 773-276-3600 or 866-468-3401, \$8.

**CC FROGS, MOMMY AND DADDY** Something weird must happen after you've written and recorded a few thousand songs with somebody. Milwaukee brothers Dennis and Jimmy Flemion, better known as the **FROGS**, have been playing together since grade school, and their breakout album, 1989's *It's Only Right and Natural*, was a bizarre collection of semi-improvised "gay supremacist" psych-folk-pop culled from the hundreds of tapes they'd made at home over the years. The really weird part, if you ask me, is that they used their own batty lo-fi recordings by choice, not because they didn't know their way around a mixing board—the studio-crafted songs on their self-titled 1988 debut were witty, meticulously arranged, and unimpeachably catchy, and I'm sure that in the Flemions' warped minds that record was intended as a bid for mainstream success, despite titles like "F'd Over Jesus" and mental lyrics like "She came from earth / And I came from the gods" (from "She Was a Mortal"). They seem to have convinced themselves that the world has done them a great injustice by failing to reward their genius: their 1997 *Starjob* EP, produced by Billy Corgan and released on D'arcy Wretzky and James Iha's Scratchie label, contained a track called "I Only Play 4 Money," and the Flemions say they mean what it says. (I've booked the Frogs before, and I'm not inclined to disagree.) Like many brothers—and many bands—they've developed an argot they use only with each other, and it spills over into the music the rest of us get to hear. In a '97 interview with the *Onion*, Dennis Flemion took a break from his usual outrageous self-aggrandizement to say something candid: "We play songs as if it's us speaking amongst ourselves privately; this is how people speak to one another... Somehow, when our songs come out, there's no gray area in the way people interpret them. And in reality, it's pretty gray." In other words, their shocking, sarcastic, surreal lyrics are actually quite sincere. —J. Niimi

**MOMMY AND DADDY**, a married couple from New York who trade off on electric bass, sampler beats, and vocals, continued on page 6