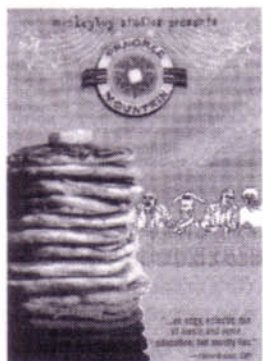


punk planet

notes from underground



Pancake Mountain vols 1-4 Scott Stuckey, producer

If you're into any sort of underground music and have children, you are probably well familiar with the mind-numbing characteristics of much of contemporary children's music. Bands and musicians such as the Wiggles, Laurie Berkner, and Raffi have created a canon of songs that means well, but ultimately presents kids with an overly safe, often banal, representation of music. Not surprisingly, such mainstream children's artists play it safe, trying to be as inclusive as possible

to appeal to the largest audience. The inevitable result of such a strategy is a collection of CDs and DVDs that share the same sense of predictability throughout. They sound, in short, how music for kids has always sounded.

Turning this cautious world of children's music on its head is a wonderful new three volume set of DVDs from the *Pancake Mountain* television series. For those that are unaware of the program, *Pancake Mountain* is a Washington, DC-based cable-access show that allows independent rockers to try their hand at children's entertainment. Want to see noted DC scenester and Dischord Records founder Ian MacKaye perform an original composition entitled "Vowel Movement?" It's here on volume one. Or how about Ted Leo (a current favorite in this writer's household: my two year-old daughter squeals in delight as Leo attempts to hit high vocal notes, as they are the same notes she hits when she wants attention) doing a kick-ass rendition of "Wheels on the Bus?" Check out volume three. Such luminaries as Henry Rollins, George Clinton, and Shirley Manson of Garbage also make appearances in numerous episodes. And if this sounds a little too adult, such characters as Senor Suds and Blueberry Boy are there to provide comic relief, giving kids a chance to laugh—and even learn a bit (a strong anti-consumerist streak runs throughout the series)—in between the bursts of rock and roll. At least in our family, these DVDs have given my daughter and me a sense of cultural common ground: we now actually share a few favorite bands. And believe me, there is no greater joy in parenthood than introducing your child to anything that they come to love.

The *Pancake Mountain* series makes it known that music for children need not limit itself to the genre we know as "children's music." At the same time, it illustrates that there is much in current indie rock that speaks to the aesthetic tastes of children. One sees this in Deerhoof, a band whose vocalist, Satomi Matsuzaki, often seems to have the voice of an actual toddler. It is therefore unsurprising when this band gets a tremendous response from the *Pancake Mountain* audience.

Yet perhaps the most entertaining aspect of these DVDs, at least for an adult, is seeing many of today's hottest bands interact with such characters as Muppet-wannabe Rufus Leaking (who jokingly confuses Bright Eyes' Conor Oberst with old blue eyes—Frank Sinatra), and Captain Perfect, a grown man in superhero garb who dances onstage with many of the acts. This makes for entertaining children's television, and seems to add a level of much-needed humility to many of these self-important "artists." It's hard to maintain your cooler-than-everything posture when you're being heckled by a grown man in a top hat and a cape.

To many, the delight of this series may sound like a bunch of aging punkers trying to relive their childhoods, or, now that they are starting to have kids of their own, attempting

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to force their own interests onto their offspring. The more cynical may even see such products as just another example of market segmentation, showing once and for all that the indie scene is just as business savvy as the mainstream. These are both valid arguments that, as children's music continues to expand its boundaries, deserve critical attention. But one look at the expressions of joy and exhilaration on the faces of both band members and the children dancing on stage during Arcade Fire's "Wake Up" (found on *Pancake Mountain* volume two) is enough to put some of these concerns permanently to rest. For the length of this performance, artist and audience come together in a moment that is both wildly exhilarating and refreshingly innocent. Here, on display for all to witness, is the splendor of children of all ages enjoying the power of a beautiful song.—Michael Carriere

www.pancakemountain.com

