

Norah Jones - El Madmo (2008)

Written by bluesever

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1. Carlo! 2. Head in a Vise 3. Vampire Guy 4. GGW 5. Sweet Adrenaline 6. Attack of the Rock People 7. The Best Part 8. Fantasy Guy 9. I Like it Low 10. Scary Lady 11. Nonny Goat Mon 12. Rock Yer Balls Off
El - Guitar (Bass), Vocals Maddie - Guitar (Electric), Vocals El Madmo - Composer Mo - Drums, Vocals

Say this for Norah Jones: she's determined to shake her reputation as a coffeehouse chanteuse. She only spent one album refining the jazz-folk of her unexpected blockbuster 2002 debut, *Come Away with Me*, before she started to stray off the reservation, singing country cabaret with the Little Willies in 2006; penning all the songs on her thick hazy 2007 album, *Not Too Late*; and following that with the alt-rock jape *El Madmo* in 2008. As the trio members -- Norah supported by Daru Oda and Andrew Borger of her backing group the Handsome Band -- adopt stage names, sport shock wigs, smear their eyes with heavy makeup, and sing songs called "Rock Yer Balls Off," they're easy to tag as "punk," but that label doesn't quite fit, even if their self-titled debut opens with a rash of songs littered with curses. There are no frantic rhythms, the guitars are always in clean, crisp tones, and by the time *El Madmo* hits its midpoint, the trio is already dipping into a slow groove for "I Like It Low," a song smoky enough to be an eccentric tune on a proper Norah Jones album. Here, it's a bit of an exception to the rule, but *El Madmo* are simply not punks. They're imps, telling silly jokes about the cool dude with the good pot, going for obvious rhymes, rolling their tongues and singing in rastaman accents, playing songs that are deliberately amateurish but sometimes accidentally turn into very good pop songs. Sometimes all this joshing around veers toward the cutesy (how could it not?), but *El Madmo* manage to avoid the hipster trap of being self-satisfied, possibly because they're so goofy they refuse to be taken seriously, possibly because they're skilled musicians who still can sound good when they're striving to be sloppy, possibly because Norah Jones remains a compelling vocalist even when she's singing nonsense. Any way you look at it, *El Madmo* isn't meant to be taken seriously; it's just a lark, but surprisingly it's almost as much fun for the listener as it is for the band. ---Stephen Thomas Erlewine

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