

U2

Pop (Island)

Rating: ***

By Billy Altman

While no one's ever accused U2 of being a Stryper in wolf's clothing, the group's new album *Pop* may well be the one that finally capsizes the arkful of questions that the band's nebulously articulated religious beliefs have always begged. As previewed by the "I was a teenage Village People zombie" video for the collection's first single, "Discotheque," as well as their tour-announcing press conference at a K-Mart in New York City, Bono and his mates continue to self-consciously mock every last aspect of commercial/materialistic/heathen rock iconography--something they've obviously felt compelled to do ever since they achieved superstar status with 1987's *The Joshua Tree*. At this stage of their career, however, it's difficult to understand the point of such gimmicky shenanigans, which seem to be more about amusing themselves than sharing whatever sense of humor they think they've developed. Given the gravity of the lyrics peeking out from under the jungle rhythms and electronic bleats on these songs--God and/or Jesus is referenced on virtually every track--you'd think they'd be much more aware of vanity's role as one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Then again, that's a huge part of the problem with *Pop*. While there are some undeniably strong songs here--specifically, "If God Will Send His Angels," "Staring At The Sun" and "Last Night On Earth," a trio of tunes that follow each other at the one-quarter mark of the album's hour-long running time--the overall tone of *Pop* is relentlessly heavy-handed, and embarrassingly self-serving as well. When Bono sings "Me [and] you, stuck together with God's glue," or "It's who you know that gets you through the gates of the Playboy Mansion," it's hard to feel like you're not being preached to. And much as U2 likes to bemoan the fact that (in their words), "they put Jesus in show business, now it's hard to get in the door," they're fooling themselves if they think that just because they've thrown a blanket of irony over it all, they're not doing just that. As it is written: The road to you-know-where is paved with good intentions.