

MATTHEW SWEET

Blue Sky On Mars (Zoo)

Rating: ★★★★★

By Jon Young

The embodiment of all that's right about power pop, Matthew Sweet champions a style almost as predictable as the blues--and almost as abused. Much the way multitudes of hack bands trashed the legacy of Muddy Waters, Elmore James, et. al., Beatles geeks have trivialized the Fab Four with lame retreads of their soulful goodness. Sweet himself turned in crummy knockoffs before hitting his stride with the *Girlfriend* album a few years back. Today, he specializes in tangy tunes that refresh the genre through subtle rule-bending and a heap of plain ol' talent.

Blue Sky On Mars boasts a funkier vibe than its predecessor, the bracing *100% Fun*: Instead of recruiting ace guitarists Robert Quine and Richard Lloyd for another tour of duty, the less accomplished Sweet provides most of the axes, resulting in a homemade feel. (In the same spirit, producer Brendan O'Brien sometimes pounds a rumbling acoustic piano.) "Come To California" practically boogies, while "Into Your Drug" relies on stinging fuzztones and cheesy pre-digital electronics. Although the wistful "Behind The Smile" revels in the kind of graceful sentimentality that encourages cliché, Sweet's crisp execution minimizes the corniness. And just to prove he's more versatile than initial impressions suggest, "Hollow" combines tortured guitar a la Neil Young with the ominous observation that "An evil bigger than you could know/Has taken root."

Sweet also proves he's not perfect on the album's tedious closer, the aggressively melancholy "Missing Time." Otherwise, the boy makes old-fashioned sounds seem brand-new, the standout being "Over It," a brisk 95-second survey of love's debris. But *Blue Sky On Mars* has enough highlights to fill a greatest-hits album. A warm, winning singer with a knack for ringing melodies and deceptively complex lyrics, Matthew Sweet is simply swell.