

FREEDY JOHNSTON

Never Home (Elektra)

Rating: ****1/2

By Dev Sherlock

After a less-than-stunning debut, singer-songwriter Freedy Johnston's career took off with the release of his second album, 1992's *Can You Fly*, a pretty remarkable collection of mostly-acoustic-based, heartfelt songs and stories. The album landed him on every music critic's year-end list--and on a major label--but it also made for a pretty daunting high-water mark for Johnston. To wit, his next album, *This Perfect World*, which found him somewhat oddly paired with producer Butch Vig (Nirvana, Smashing Pumpkins, Garbage), comprised an exceptional batch of songs, but simply failed to match its predecessor. With his latest, however, Johnston is again in stunning form.

There are so many cliches when it comes to the attributes of great songwriting, but Johnston's songs truly are hummable, memorable, mature and, in most cases, universal--and he deftly pulls this off without sounding trite. How he avoids the trap of the hokey singer-songwriter is a wonder, and probably part of his appeal, too. Then, part of it may have to do with his unassuming voice--however sweetly multi-tracked, he will never be mistaken for Barry White.

Johnston also worked this time with producer and renowned session guitarist Danny Kortchmar (James Taylor, Jackson Browne, Carole King), who provided a warm environment for Johnston and his gentle strumming. But, given the occasional lap steel guitar and Freedy's occasional twang (not to mention his midwestern roots--though he now lives in Hoboken, NJ), he probably has more in common with prairie-rockers like the Jayhawks, Wilco and Uncle Tupelo than old-school singer-songwriters. And that's something to be thankful for.