

# Grittiness of 'American Gangster' at odds with lush studio

## Dream Theater *Systematic Chaos*

Dream Theater made the move to Roadrunner Records earlier this year. Almost immediately, they became the label's franchise band, releasing a single, shooting a video (their first in more than 10 years) and embarking on a huge worldwide tour in support of their newest album, *Systematic Chaos*.

The record features everything that has made the band the leading force in progressive metal for more than 20 years: epic, multi-movement compositions, instrumental virtuosity and an ability to find the harmony and hook in odd time signatures, the beauty in the disjointed. The eight-track album runs nearly 80 minutes, but, despite the length, there's never a dull moment.

*Systematic Chaos* is book-ended by the two-part, 25-and-a-half-minute "In The Presence of Enemies," a powerful track that goes from a high-octane, speedy introduction by guitarist John Petrucci to a breakdown in the middle section that features one of the best executions of musical tension ever

recorded, before building up to a truly intense climax, a catharsis of everything the song is about.

All in all, *Systematic Chaos* is brilliance, a five-star release from one of the most consistently good bands in music. The names LaBrie, Myung, Petrucci, Portnoy and Rudess will soon be burned into the memories of every person with an ounce of musical sensibility. *Systematic Chaos* is Dream Theater's ninth album, but, trust me, they're just getting started.

— Robert Rich

## Jay-Z *American Gangster*

The God MC solidified his status as the best rapper of all time, living or deceased, and all it took was Diddy, Denzel and a kitschy concept album with major plot holes. As a narrative, *American Gangster* is a jumbled affair with sequencing issues; a cliché-happy, rise and fall, tired tale that red-blooded males have been rehashing since the roaring '20s.

Thing is, Jay-Z isn't an actor, director or screenwriter. Jay-Z is a hustler; he sold water to wells and

lived to tell. To this day, he recently told Rolling Stone, he fears sitting in barbershops or going to movies — paranoid of staying in one place too long. He is the most authentic contemporary pop culture icon we have.

And, unlike his coattail riders, Cam'ron and 50 and Jim Jones and Rick Ross and the like, he's way past glorifying the lifestyle, way past reveling in cocaine exploits or gat battles. *American Gangster* is equal parts love letter to hip-hop's founding pillars (the entrepreneurial hustle, '70s soul, New York City), warning shots at inferior henchmen, presentation of the crack game's perils sans moral compass and throne-reclaiming lyrical lashing.

Last year's *Kingdom Come*, the corner office, I-have-so-much-money-I-can-race-Danica-Patrick fiscal supremacy album, was the best thing that could've happened to Hova: challenge this man's relevance and the lion will roar.

I can't imagine being in a private, billion dollar studio with Diddy, Nas, Mariah Carey and Kanye West, enjoying life's finer things, all the while churning out

such gritty, raw, artistic product.  
— Ramon Ramirez

## Sondre Lerche *Phantom Punch/Dan In Real Life*

Sondre Lerche was a busy man in 2007. Between releasing his fourth major-label LP within a year of his third and spending most of his time on a movie set in Rhode Island, it's a wonder Lerche was able to keep up with his wife of two years, the press and his fans. Yet, he balanced it all with grace and humility and produced two of the undisputedly best albums of the year.

*Phantom Punch* was an expression of all of the pent-up energy the musician has collected over the years; it is, as the title suggests, his punchiest album yet. The lyrics range from love ballads to timely observations of his New York surroundings, where Lerche owns an apartment and rests his feet when he visits the States.

*Dan In Real Life*, on the other hand, was perfectly attuned to the film it accompa-

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