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VOLUME CONTROL

X-Ecutioners
Built From Scratch
Loud Records

With no vocalist and little production, the X-Ecutioners defy the traditional concept of a rap group. A quartet of DJs comprised of Rob Swift, Total Eclipse, Roc Raida and Mista Sinista, previously known as the X-Men, has been bubbling just under the mainstream's radar for the better part of a decade.

Its series of underground solo efforts, group projects and guest appearances landed the X-Ecutioners a deal with Loud Records, one of hip-hop's preeminent labels. The time to shine is now. With its first major label album, *Built From Scratch*, it attempts to do just that.

The record starts off in predictable fashion: a simple break beat with vocal samples scratched and juggled on top. Not surprisingly, all the samples are taken from the records of other Loud artists like Mobb Deep and Raekwon, thus avoiding massive sampling fees. This familiar routine functions as a segue of sorts for the length of the album, linking the songs and giving the LP an air of spontaneity. But a glance at the liner notes reveals that the X-Men were not responsible for track one; rather, they let another turntablist group, Triple Threat, open for them.

The second track, "XL," gets things started with a vintage beat by Large Professor. In a rare vocal appearance, Extra P drops lyrics that leave the listener wondering why he does not pick up the mic more often. Rob Swift handles the scratching on this one, and the X-Men are on the board.

After more turntables, the album presents the first of several outstanding cuts such as, "A Journey Into Sound," which feature beat boxing by Kenny Muhammed, a.k.a. The Human Orchestra. This lost art is hip-hop at its finest.

Next, in what has become the Achilles heel of the modern hip-hop album, the X-Ecutioners include a skit that is neither funny nor necessary. This idiocy is forced on the listener twice more before the album ends, to similar results.

Before too long, things get back on track with

the suitably raucous "Let It Bang" featuring M.O.P. The energy this group brings is the rap equivalent of heavy metal. The listener is treated to another quality guest appearance. This time it is Dan The Automator providing the backdrop for "X-Ecutioners' Theme Song."

The LP serves up several other notable songs, including "The X (Y'all Know The Name)," an exceptional posse cut featuring Pharoahe Monch, Xzibit, Inspectah Deck and [Mad] Skillz, and the previously-released "Dramacyde," a teaming of rap legends Koolha and Big Pun (R.I.P.). Fat Man Scoop shows up to do what he does best, move the crowd on the infectious "Play That Beat."

In addition to the skits, the album is filled in other areas. The boredom-inducing lead single, "It's Goin' Down," featuring Linkin Park is a blatant attempt to capitalize on the metal hysteria that most hip-hop fans hope would be over by now. In a bizarre duet, Tom Club is enlisted to perform a remake of its 1981 hit "Genius of Love" with the diabolical Biz Markie. This cut has no value other than providing some of the humor that Biz is famous for. Appearances by DJ Premier and Everlast are similarly disappointing.

Basically an album of songs by various artists linked by the constant scratching and juggling of the DJs, *Built From Scratch* is closer to a mix-tape than a rap album. Judged in this manner, it is above average, easily defeating the standard DJ Clue or Tom Touch tape. However, given that this "mix-tape" had major label support, it should be judged as an album. Hip-hop purists will find themselves torn between the mastery of some of the art-form's basic elements and the gross commercialism represented by songs like "It's Goin' Down." However, if the listener can overlook the LP's few faults, what remains is a relatively respectable debut worthy of a spin or two. (Grade: B+)

-Gabe Patterson

PEOPLE IN THE NEWS

Train, Alien Ant Farm win at California Music Awards

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — Train, the Grammy Award-winning San Francisco rock band, took home several top honors at the California Music Awards, including best album for its *Drops of Jupiter*.

Train's lead singer, Pat Monahan, also won an award Saturday for outstanding male vocalist, and the group took home the outstanding songwriter award.

No Doubt's energetic front-woman, Gwen Stefani, won for outstanding female vocalist.

The award for outstanding group went to the award show's perennial favorites from San

Jose, Smash Mouth. East Bay punkers Green Day, which made its mark in Oakland's warehouse district, won for artist of the year.

Southern California's Alien Ant Farm won best hard rock/heavy metal album and best debut album.

"I can't believe we beat Tool," said band member Terry Corso, referring to the band's rival in the hard rock category. "What up with that?"

Woody Allen acknowledges fans overseas

RADNOR, Pa. (AP) — Director Woody Allen said he has no idea why his biggest fans tend to be from overseas, rather than in the United States.

"It's one of those inexplicable things," Allen told TV Guide's May 4 issue. "People always like imported things better. We think that imported cheese, imported wine is better by virtue of the fact that it's imported."

Allen will be presenting his movie, *Hollywood Ending*, at an opening night of the Cannes Festival next month in France.

The 66-year-old director, star of such films as *Bananas*, *Annie Hall* and *Mighty Aphrodite*, said he has no plans to stop writing anytime soon.

"I don't see myself running out of ideas," he said. "I've been what I've done most of my life, but primarily I'm a writer."

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