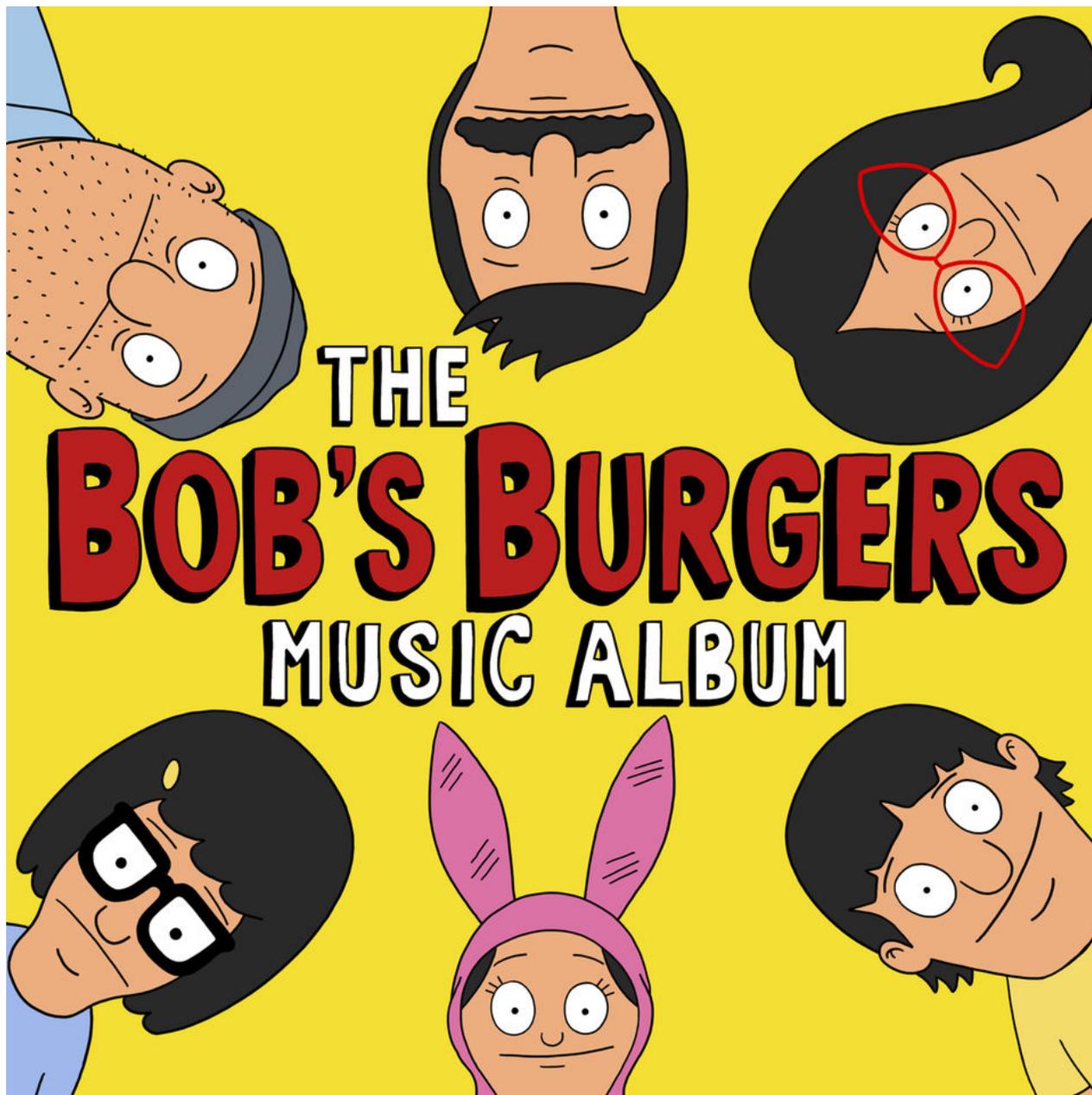


Review: The Bob's Burgers Music Album

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At the heart of the Season 5 *Bob's Burgers* episode "Li'l Hard Dad", a great little exchange takes place between Bob, who's on his way to demand a refund for his crashed model helicopter, and his son Gene. "Some people say you have to learn to let things go," Bob rhapsodizes, not realizing how self-important he sounds. "Well, you know what happens when you learn to let things go? You drop the thing you're holding!" Gene's been recording the whole thing on his portable keyboard, and when Bob finishes his spiel, Gene plays it back. "I sound important," Bob observes. Then Gene punctuates the speech with a sampled fart. "Maybe take out the fart noise?" Bob suggests. Gene refuses. "It makes you go, 'good point.' And also: 'good fart!'"

One wonders if showrunner Loren Bouchard hasn't channeled a bit of himself into Gene, the middle child of the burger-flipping Belcher family around which the show revolves. Like all eleven-year-olds, Gene is obsessed with all things flatulent. But it's a running gag that he might be a musical genius: he's been known to write sweeping

Spectorian pop songs and entire stage productions, to the amazement of everyone that knows him – though it should come as no surprise that they’re usually about things like man-on-elephant love. Gene Belcher elevates immaturity to the level of art, which makes a neat parallel with the show itself – as well as the songs Bouchard composes for it, all 112 of which are now available in a sprawling box set from Sub Pop.

None of the songs collected on *The Bob’s Burgers Music Album* are exactly what you’d call high-stakes. Few breach two minutes, and most that do are heavy on expository dialogue. For the most part, they’re jingles explaining what’s going on in the plot, or songs sung by Gene or his equally musically-inclined mother Linda and set to music for a reprise over the credits. Even the show’s most famous tune by some margin, the aforementioned man-on-elephant pop song “Electric Love”, isn’t allowed to be a full song; Gene’s sister Louise interrupts it halfway through.

But Bouchard really puts work into these tunes. He strives to make each one better than it really needs to be. Take a jokey rendition of Eddie Money’s “Baby Hold On”, played over the end credits of Season 3’s “O.T.: The Outside Toilet”. A lesser parodist would have been content to let the song get by on John Roberts’ blustery vocal. But no: Bouchard’s is the kind of brain that thinks an accordion and a mandolin would sound great in the back of the mix, for no reason but to prettify things a bit. It probably helps that Bouchard, as well as most of the show’s creatives, are about 50 years old – old enough to have fond memories of the song. There’s a whisper of ‘80s nostalgia throughout the show, both in its music and its references to movies like *Die Hard* and *Working Girl*. So they’re less likely to look down on this music, and Bouchard’s “Baby Hold On” ends up doing justice to the song even while poking fun at the bombast of ‘80s radio rock.

A lot of the humor of *Bob’s Burgers* comes from how different sets of characters interact, and Bouchard wrings some of the same humor out of the musical settings in which he situates his characters. It might seem strange to hear Sam Seder’s health inspector Hugo sing “You’re the Best” from *The Karate Kid* until you realize that a lovelorn guy with an inferiority complex and an irascible shriek of a voice makes the perfect ‘80s rock star. And it’s worth wondering why Linda sings her “Diarrhea Song”, raspberries and all, through a telephone filter with which Jack White would be happy to muddy his voice until you realize she sees herself as a rock star fronting the show of her own life, and her dumb little mom songs as artworks as powerful as “Purple Rain”.

It’s not just the characters singing. The world of *Bob’s Burgers* has its own pop industry, and its standards are, to say the least, a lot lower than in our world. The character Doug Wheeler is apparently a successful jingle writer, but the best tune he can come up with for Bob’s restaurant is “blazing beef in big ol’ buns, bun bun bun bun bun bun bun!” (This song is sadly not included). The headliner of a festival gasps about her vagina over two notes. A song like “Parakeet In My Hat” doesn’t scan as a mean-spirited parody of calypso but what you’d expect to pass for calypso in this universe. (I wonder what this dimension’s calypsonians call themselves. If the ones in our world are called shit like Mighty Sparrow and King Obstinate, I can’t even imagine.)

“Jingle in the Jungle” is presented as a tune Gene irritatingly insists on requesting on the radio, and we expect it to be the kind of themed novelty crap only an 11-year-old would like, probably with lots of elephant noises, but it turns out to be a mid-century carol that Bob admits is “kind of good.” Still, “kind of good” on this show leaves room for lines like “jingle in the jungle/won’t you bringle me a bundle.” It’s a deft hand that can write a song that both viewers and listeners are likely to perceive as “good” but is still as deliberately bad as it needs to be to be comedy music.

The music here bypasses nearly all the usually jokes in comedy rock. The show’s in-house boy band Boyz 4 Now could have mustered up enough chuckles as a parody of the banality of corporate music, with some sunglasses-wearing stooge moaning about how “we in the club” or something. But their songs are fully realized jingles revolving around remarkably unsettling metaphors. One song’s hook goes “be mine/coal mine/be mine/diamond mine,” and the video shows the boys laboring deep in a tunnel with headlamps and pickaxes; the absurd theme is nearly as funny as the juxtaposition of these pin-up pop stars with their deeply unsexy environs. Another song, “Whisper Into Your Eyes,” devolves into a monologue where Max Greenfield’s early-Bieber clone Boo Boo waxes poetic about “lip-eyes” and barely suppresses a chuckle.

The lack of any sort of punching-down humor is astonishing as well. The show flirted with the edginess of a MacFarlane production early on, when it was getting its legs and probably trying to prove itself; those first few episodes are cringeworthy today, with their cheap jokes about child molesters and cannibalism. But the show never employs ethnic humor and never makes mean jokes out of Gene's gender-fluidity or Tina's sexuality. Hell, Linda isn't even a housewife. even its dubious portrayal of transgender women in early episode "Sheesh? Cab, Bob?" was arguably progressive for its time. The closest we get here is the calypso song, with its fake Caribbean accent – and it always sketched me out that the show writers made up a fake Native American word, "Quippiquissett," to turn into a joke about "Quickie Kiss-It." Still, this is probably the least offensive comedy rock album ever made, and if you're skeptical of the jockiness of jesters like Tenacious D or the Lonely Island, this sweet, funny album is a good place to turn.

There's no way someone unfamiliar with *Bob's Burgers* is going to want to suffer all two hours of this album. But there are few casual *Bob's* fans. In my experience, you either love the show or don't get it. It sneaks up on you. It might seem repulsive at first, with its bad puns and perpetual references to farts and butts. But that's just the flavoring; the true humor of the show comes from internalizing its characters, and that's the real reason it's such a grower. Once you know enough about Louise, it becomes so much funnier when she decides to meddle in the school's class president campaign or turn the restaurant into a casino because of *course* that's what she'd do, that little shit. Likewise, once you realize Linda truly believes she's a rock star, you understand why Bouchard's lavished so much time and effort into casting her as one. **B**