

Ben Folds

rockin' the suburbs (Sony 550)

★★★★

It's been far too long since we've heard from Ben Folds, the post-modern piano man who conjured up the *Unauthorized Biography Of Reinhold Messner* and wooed William Shatner to "sing" on his side project, *Fear of Pop*.

When the Ben Folds Five disbanded this March, many fans were taken aback, wondering if Folds would return with his deep songwriting and arrangements. Now the fans can rest easy, because Ben has delivered an album full of populist sentiment and personal reflection that takes off like a bottle rocket in American suburbia, an intense compilation of vignettes and songs based around everyday people, be they the newspaperman laid off from his job to make room for new talent in "fred jones part 2," or the spoiled little girl in "carrying cathy." In "zak and sara," he sings of a girl in the '80s stuck listening to her boyfriend's boring guitar riffs while she forecasts the future of techno music.

"still fighting it" shows a not-so-typical father-and-son relationship by turning the two into army buddies going through the war of life. Ben says the song was inspired by a look of pain he saw on his son's face when he came home from the hospital. He felt sorry for him, then realized that life from here on out gets worse: "everybody knows that it hurts to grow up...and you're so lost like me and I'm sorry...about 20 years from now, maybe we'll sit down and have a few beers and I can tell you about today, and how I picked you up and everything changed."

Everything has changed. Folds has lost the Five, he's writing and playing all of his material, and life goes

on in all of its pain and suffering—Folds just shows us that we're all in it together. That's about the best thing he could have told us, that we're all "still fighting it" and we can make it through, have a few beers and tell each other the stories of "zak and sara," and "...cathy," all while Ben Folds sits at his piano feverishly rockin' the suburbs.

—Dan Marek



Nanci Griffith

