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Ben Folds
BEN FOLDS LIVE
 (EPIC)



Thirty years ago, Ben Folds would have had his hands full battling it out with Elton John for the title of king of the pop piano men. But since he emerged as the leader of his Ben Folds Five in 1995, the Chapel Hill tunesmith has had the luxury of being the only piano-playing pop singer to come out of the alternative nation. Having dropped the Five for *Live*, he embarked on the solo piano tour documented here in 70 minutes that include his minor radio hits, "Brick" and "Army," as well as a wide selection of his moody, melodic, and often witty songwriting. The production is crisp and clear without filtering out the crucial bits of audience participation: on "Army" and "Not the Same," he gets some help from his fans, who sing the harmony sections, and the recording captures the affable Folds taking a request for the song "Rock This Bitch."

Although most of this material was originally recorded with the bass-and-drums backing of the Five, some tunes — "Narcolepsy" and "Jane" in particular — sound better without a rhythm section. The concert-hall acoustics add warmth and depth to the jazzy melancholia of "Silver Street" and the theatrics of "The Last Polka." And it's hard not to smile along with Folds as he digs into a cover of "Tiny Dancer," a tune by none other than Sir Elton himself.


(Ben Folds joins Rubyhorse and Dishwalla at Avalon next Thursday, December 5. Call 617-423-NEXT.)

BY NEAL ALPERT

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