

Music

Strokes resurface on 'Earth'

Pop/rock: The Strokes, *First Impressions of Earth* (★★★ out of four) After spearheading the new millennium's rock resurgence with 2001's snotty and swaggering *Is This It*, The Strokes lost ground after 2003's half-baked *Room on Fire*. This third disc recaptures some of the New York band's initial zest while ditching a confining formula that kept The Strokes tethered to



By Frank Ockenfels

They're back: The Strokes' Nikolai Fraiture, left, Fab Moretti, Julian Casablancas, Albert Hammond Jr. and Nick Valensi.

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Music reviews by
 USA TODAY critics

catchy but claustrophobic songs and the most annoying vocal distortions since Peter Frampton. Julian Casablancas' lyrics still range from idiosyncratic to idiotic, but his voice has blossomed to a fuller croon that better conveys his ennui, sarcasm, bitterness and jaded worldview. Producer David Kahne delivers the same taut and polished sound, only it's splashier and more daring, as the group stretches for touches of glam-rock, surf guitars and even a sly twist on Barry Manilow's *Mandy*. Now that's an imaginative stroke. — **Edna Gundersen**

Imogen Heap, *Speak for Yourself*

(★★★½) In a pop scene bombarded with bombast, a light touch and a little imagination go a long way. Like Dido and Esthero — two other female artists who didn't learn to sing by trying to out-emote Mariah Carey — Heap dusts graceful, piquant vocals over atmospheric arrangements. The results, from the shimmering *Headlock* to the electro-cappella *Hide and Seek*, twinkle and beguile, proving less can leave you wanting more. — **Elysa Gardner**

Emma Roberts, *Unfabulous and More* (★★½) The daughter of actor Eric Roberts, and niece of Julia, this 14-year-old Nickelodeon star is as well-connected as she is precocious. But the modest charms



By Vicky Dawe

Heap: Minimalist pop packs punch.

of her debut lie in the unaffected youthfulness she brings to buoyant confections such as *Say Goodbye to Jr.* *High* and the single *I Wanna Be*. With so many adolescent stars being promoted as budding Lolitas, it's refreshing to hear from someone who enjoys being a girl. — **Gardner**

Cindy Bullens, *Dream #29*

(★★★) Boston Red Sox devotees will want to check out this cult heroine's CD to hear pitcher Tim Wakefield sing Tom Petty-like harmony on *7 Days*. But all admirers of Bullens' unforced grit will enjoy the rootsy reliables she cranks out with help from more experienced musicians such as Delbert McClinton and Elton John. From the bluesy *This Ain't Love* to the plaintive *Mockingbird Hill*, this is sports-bar-friendly music even a Yankees fan could love. — **Gardner**

Blues: Dion, *Bronx in Blue*

(★★★) Anybody who doubts Dion's potential as a blues singer really ought to take a fresh listen to *Lovers Who Wander*, *(I Was) Born to Cry* or the John Lee Hooker-inspired foot-stomping on *Ruby Baby*. Or listeners simply could check out this back-to-basics collection, in which the King of the New York Streets travels Delta back roads and Chicago side streets with Robert Johnson, Howlin' Wolf and Jimmy Reed as his guides. Songs such as *Crossroads*, *Honky Tonk Blues* and *Baby What You Want Me to Do* helped form the foundation of the exuberant rock 'n' roll Dion created with The Belmonts. Dion brings the same excitement to those songs as he did to his own early hits, accompanied by little more than thumping percussion and his own surprisingly evocative acoustic guitars. — **Brian Mansfield**

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