



## **Cubed Circle Newsletter 182: Beat the Champ Review & Extreme Rules Preview**

The roles are reversed this week, as Ben has been rendered unable to review any of his usual shows this week, which means that comprising this issue is my writing exclusively. Writing about what exactly? Why a pro-wrestling indie rock concept album, and a preview of a pay-per-view I haven't seen any TV build for, coupled with the standard ratings reports. The good news is that Ben will be back soon, everybody.

– Ryan Clingman, *Cubed Circle Newsletter Editor*

### **Extreme Rules 2015 Set to be a Great Show**

This month's WWE pay-per-view preview is fairly unique in that it has been written by someone who did not see the go-home show for Extreme Rules nor any of the post-Mania shows preceding it, apart from the post-WrestleMania RAW last month. Perhaps I shouldn't be writing this preview given my lack of first hand experience of the shows leading into this event, but the following observations were made without much need for direct viewing experience of the television product.

The biggest story leading into Extreme Rules has focused on someone who will probably fail to even appear on the show in Daniel Bryan. But four months after returning from a shoulder and neck injury that inhibited him from working outside of 2014's quarter, Daniel Bryan seems to be facing a very similar predicament now, in late April 2015. It is believed, according to this week's Observer newsletter, that Bryan sustained injuries at the hands of Sheamus during the European tour – injuries that had WWE pull him from the remainder of the tour. Bryan was scheduled to wrestle Wade Barrett in an IC title defence on Extreme Rules, which doesn't seem to be probable on Saturday morning (+02:00 GMT) as I write this. Whilst this may seem like a lesser injury, or perhaps but an aggravation of last year's, it should be noted that the 2014 injury was originally thought to only keep Bryan out a few weeks until his estimated recovery time was extended, and then extended once more. I would suspect that should Bryan remain injured for yet another extended period, his chances of regaining the WWE World Heavyweight Championship and main event position upon his, presumably inevitable, return may well lessen. Whilst making some minor improvements to his in-ring style – perhaps the most major of which was his back-flip immediately after his running dropkick in the corner, which means the requirement of fewer back bumps – Bryan still wrestles a very physical style though one that with his in-ring ability, charisma, and popularity could be safely diluted and modified.

Headlining the show is Seth Rollins in his first defence of his newly won WWE World Heavyweight Championship against Randy Orton in a steel cage match. This would sound fairly

exciting, or at least be a candidate for the best match of the night. However, not only is the RKO banned, which is but a small restriction given the ability of both men, but Kane will be the official enforcer or overseer of the cage door, which most assuredly signs for unneeded interference on the part of Kane and J&J Security. Of course, there does exist the possibility of Lesnar returning to destroy everyone in the cage, but this would need to lead into, at the very least, build to a Lesnar/Rollins match, which I don't think they should be explicitly building towards just yet.



John Cena will also be defending his US championship against Rusev in what is being built as a "Russian Chain Match", which is essentially a Bull-Rope/Four Corners match without the Cow Bell. Blood is by no means necessary or sufficient for me to enjoy a stipulation match, but chain matches suffer without it. Why they couldn't have booked a "Russian Strap" match is beyond me. Chances are that much of the audience watching this match weren't exposed to the Piper/Valentine classic from the first Starrcade, but there still exist matches such as Guerrero/JBL, relatively fresh in the memories of some, which relied heavily on blood. Of course there also exists a plausibility issue here, as people who are struck repeatedly with chains generally tend to bleed. This may not be as great an issue as one would think, as the sledgehammer, which I am far from a fan of, is still over despite its absurdity - and so perhaps this match will be as well. They could also avoid chain shots to the face, which would in that case too detract from the match. On a more general front, I am unaware as to how good of an idea it really was to book this match, as Cena has to win, given their desire to build the US title division around him, but neither man has all too much to gain from a victory, where as Rusev will suffer from another loss, even if it isn't by pinfall.

Also on the card is Big Show versus Roman Reigns, a pairing that has been met with disdain over recent weeks due to creatives insistence to keep going a "feud" that never took off to even the slightest degree. The bout will be a last man standing match, which far from existing, will probably render it a sleeper match much like Cena/Wyatt at Payback last year – a match no one wanted to see at that time. There is no utility in having Big Show win here, nor do I at all expect them to book him as such, however, what is the larger variable here is whether or not this will be the final match in a very unpopular feud, or if it is but another matchup in a program that was never going anywhere to begin with.

The match that I suspect to be the best on the show with Bryan/Barrett in major jeopardy, also has what is by far the worst stipulation on the entire show – Dolf Ziggler versus Sheamus in a "Kiss My Arse" match. Whilst the match will be worked in front of an Allstate Arena crowd, perhaps one of the best in the country, and may very well be one of the best WWE matches of the year, humiliation angles and stipulations of this ilk, much like the Vince McMahon 'Kiss My Ass Club' have always made the company, and business as a whole by association, come across as lowbrow.

A match with similar potential to Ziggler/Sheamus is Harper/Ambrose in a street fight, which could also be spectacular, given time, which I would expect for most matches on the card with Bryan/Barrett most probably off the show. Both men have exhibited potential for top star capability; Ambrose could be the company's biggest star and largest asset given the opportunity, and Harper, at the very least, should be in the Kane/Big Show position. If the show's additional time isn't squandered in RAW level skits and promo segments there is no reason for this match to be anything less than fantastic, especially in Chicago.

Elsewhere on the show is Nikki Bella versus Naomi for the Divas Championship in what may actually be a pretty good match given Nikki's reputation as the better of the two Bellas and Naomi's athletic ability – and there is no doubt that it will be choreographed to the highest possible degree. On the pre-show, Cesaro and Kidd will defend their Tag Titles against the New Day. Cesaro and Kidd would have been the de facto babyfaces in most arenas – they are guaranteed to be beloved babyfaces in Chicago.

Last year's Extreme Rules show didn't live up to the standard established by shows of year's prior, but with three potentially great matches, a solid remainder of the card, and what will be an outstanding crowd, this could be the company's show of the year come Sunday.

### **Beat the Champ by The Mountain Goats Album Review: The Best Oud to Pro-Wrestling Since Chikara's Glory Years**

The notion of professional wrestling as an art form to the layperson, casual viewer, and perhaps even specific individuals in the business itself, is often times expressed as ludicrous. Perhaps the cultural stigma accumulated over decades is too great a barrier to overcome, but regardless of the cause, wrestling, as much as those within a niche community may discuss it, myself included, we are in the minority as people who favour the consumption of their wrestling through a more critical, and to an extent, less visceral lens. In spite of this, there still exists room for the general public's view to sway, and if not increase the popularity of wrestling by a small amount, at least improve its perception.

'The Wrestler' in 2008 had that opportunity, although of course the probability of a single popular film, book, TV series, or movie reversing all of the damage done to public opinion is small. Regardless of whether 'The Wrestler' could have made a positive impact or not, its portrayal of wrestling and the people involved was, in several ways, overtly negative. There haven't been many analogous projects since, and the subject of this review, 'Beat the Champ' by the Mountain Goats, certainly isn't such a project. There exist numerous differences between the two, one of the most important being that 'Beat the Champ' is an indie album and not an Oscar nominated film and its portrayal of pro-wrestling is wholly more positive.

In short, 'Beat The Champ' is a love letter to professional wrestling, the variety of which I hadn't come into prior contact with. There existed Chikara at its creative peak, which one could argue was a tribute to much of what wrestling is, but that was still a pro-wrestling product. Wrestling

references and quotes are fairly common in hip-hop from Madvillan to Eminem, a whole song in the case of Milo's 'Sweet Chin Music', however, where the analogy between 'Beat The Champ' and the music of those mentioned above, and many more, fails is in their length and intent. Where you might find a wrestling inspired lyric in even a Neil Young record from the 70s, references of that sort, and even songs in the case of Milo, use a wrestling-related lexis to express unrelated ideas – and this is far from the case in 'Beat The Champ'.

Throughout its 13 tracks 'The Mountain Goats' founder, John Darnielle, hops from one topic to another flame balls, masks, hair matches, and Chavo Classic are but a few of the topics that share centre stage. What is indeed very unique about the concept album is not only the variety of topics addressed, but also the manner through which Darnielle does so, both lyrically and musically. Most every song on the album is written from a unique perspective. The album's first track 'South Western Territory', is a prime example of this, the story of an 70s/80s territorial performer losing his last match in the Los Angeles territory before "Black[ing] out from local TV"; all narrated in the third person. Whether or not this was a journeyman performer with a number of jobs, as alluded to by "work like a dog all day", or simply the tale of a star leaving the Los Angeles territory for another is unknown. Several other tracks, "Animal Mask", "Luna", and "Werewolf Gimmick" are similarly open-ended.



Conversely, other tracks on the album are highly specific, focusing on single events or wrestlers, such as the tense 'Stabbed to Death Outside San Juan', whose story should be self evident from the title – "some times you get heat, sometimes it follows you around" and "When the blade hits bone, everybody hears it sing. Shower room full of people, no one hears a goddamned thing" are two lines that serve as standouts in particular. "I am climbing down the Hertzprung-Russell diagram" is also a personal favourite from 'Stabbed to Death Outside San Juan' If only as a wrestling fan/astrophysics student; two interests one doesn't find amalgamated all too often.

As has already been made evident by the use of words such as "heat" and "gimmick", this is an album that makes use of several insider terms, which must have been a risky move given that the band's primary audience isn't the wrestling fan, even if there will exist some degree of crossover. The album shouldn't work, but it does at almost every point. One standout track is 'The Legend of Chavo Guerrero', which is written from the perspective Darnielle, reflecting on his feelings towards Chavo Classic as a hero for justice, as a child. 'The Legend of Chavo Guerrero', whilst the catchiest of all songs on the album, also distils some insight into Darnielle's current fandom in that he "heard his son got famous and went nationwide...I don't know if that's true", which would imply that he is a lapsed fan, or fell out of love with pro-wrestling during childhood.

'Fire Editorial' and 'The Ballad of Bull Ramos' are two more songs that focus on specific wrestlers, with 'Fire Editorial' describing The Sheik in 'Michigan' and 'Ontario'. In that song is also mentioned Indiana, where he wrestled for the AWA and WWA in the 1960s. 'The Ballad of Bull Ramos' discusses the nature in which Ramos lost a leg, went blind, and suffered kidney damage due to diabetes, leaving him to reminisce on his Houston porch about his career triumphs. Reading through the track listings, this track title in particular may seem a deliberately obscure choice to write a "ballad" about, but the vast majority of people who watch wrestling as children develop esoteric favourites, which is a verification of this album's honest and genuine nature. Likewise, when these songs were being written and recorded they could have thrown in references to more well known names, but the resultant product wouldn't have been as genuine.

The Luchas de Apuestas quota was not left unmet with 'Unmasked' and the closer 'Hairmatch' both serving as creative and moving descriptions of the emotion that drives a well-built match of that archetype. Some of the instrumentation on 'Hairmatch' was very Slint-esque and similar to the opener of 'Spiderland' – instrumentation wise, it wouldn't have been out of place in the famous Generico/Steen video package for Final Battle 2010. 'Unmasked' had its interesting moments, if only because of its use of the mask match as a metaphor. There were songs similar to 'Unmasked' that used wrestling more as an analogy than as the main focus of a narrative – 'Werewolf Gimmick', 'Choked Out' and 'Luna', the latter of which is in no way related to Luna Vachon. However, these tracks or just musically and thematically consistent enough, as to not disrupt the flow of the album as a whole.

There have been lyrics and songs written about pro-wrestling in the past, they are at times hideous at other times they make a positive impression -- you hear them every week on the Art of Wrestling. However, never has there been, at least to my knowledge, a set of recordings that represented pro-wrestling's good side so well -- and perhaps more importantly, reminded us of the intrigue and passion that fuelled our initial interest.

### **RAW Ratings for April 13<sup>th</sup>**

Last week's edition of RAW, a taped show from London, drew the second lowest overall viewership of the year behind the February 9<sup>th</sup> edition of the program – a 2.71 rating and 3.66 million viewers. History has shown that there is no major if any correlation between taped shows and viewership, although it should be stated that last year's UK show also did very badly, which could be an indication of a developing trend. The use of Big Show and Kane in major spots once more may also be something that the average viewer isn't interested in, although without quarter hours this is a hard conclusion to come to conclusively. Still, I don't see the average viewer, at least at this point, even with the advent of social media being concerned with the taped nature of the show. The first hour drew 3.686 million viewers (1.53 million viewers and a 1.21 rating in the 18-49 demo), the second

3.786 (1.61 million viewers and a 1.26 rating in the 18-49 demo) and the third saw a major drop to 3.525 million viewers (1.55 million viewers and a 1.22 rating in the 18-49 demo). Interestingly, the third hour was not the least watched in the 18-49 demo for whatever reason.

### **RAW Ratings for April 20<sup>th</sup> 2015**

This week's edition of RAW was up from last week – a 2.83 rating and 4.03 million viewers, what they have been doing over recent months, a worrying number given that not all too long ago they were averaging 3.0s. The show averaged a 2.83 rating and 4.03 million viewers over three hours. The first hour drew 4.105 million viewers (1.36 rating and 1.73 million viewers in the 18-49 demo, the second 4.136 million (1.40 rating and 1.77 million viewers in the 18-49 demo), and the third and final 3.873 (1.76 million viewers and a 1.38 rating in the 18-49 demo).

*As always, a big thank you goes to @Weffe on Twitter for the 18-49 ratings data.*

### **Next Week's Issue**

In next week's issue we (which means Ben and I most likely) return with a review of the upcoming Extreme Rules pay-per-view, RAW, SmackDown, NXT, updated star ratings, and more!

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