

WIRE

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THE CAT EMPIRE

The Cat Empire

★★★★

These cats pop-ulate reggae without f'in the place up

(Velour) No debating it, reggae-pop is back in a big way. Secretly spawned from Gorillaz, and made obvious by everything from the hotly protested Paris Hilton mimicry of Blondie's "The Tide Is High" to the much-lauded Lily Allen commitment of the same victimless crime. But unless you're Damon Albarn or a girl, it's tough to the do these sort of skanky dittys



without sounding a bit too much like Sublime. This London six-piece, however, manages to do just that, although their over-reliance on extra horns can give them a Cherry Poppin' Daddies vibe when not careful. Still, singer and main songwriter Felix Riebl uses just enough of his accent to dodge Cali-surferisms while the band grooves through Latin-tinged percussion and, on "Hello," even manages to make scratching sound tasteful. It also pulls off a grimy coda accompanied by a flute that could be DJ Premier having a good time and begs for more than its 15-second span. Working within a sound utterly decimated by Hacky Sack-carrying frat boys the past two decades, The Cat Empire pull off something nothing shy of astonishing by avoiding all the obvious pitfalls and coming up with a rollicking rasta-flavored mini-LP. **Jack Real**