MUSIC

STRIPES LEAVE DENVER COLD

White's stripped-down approach wearing thin

By ROBIN A. ROTHMAN
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Jack and Meg White share a stage surname, a flair for feeding rumors, and a predilection for white and red color schemes. What they don't share, unfortunately, is a talent for their respective instruments.

Over four albums, Jack White has proven that he is a fantastic guitarist and an immense songwriting talent. But it might take another act covering the White Stripes to make that clear, because seeing the duo in concert is like watching a gifted artist cut a demo. It's as if he says to Meg, "Hey, can you just keep time for me while I get this stuff down on tape?"

As soon as the Stripes hit Denver's Fillmore Auditorium Friday night, they launched speechlessly into the early tune "The Big Three Killed My Baby." A string of songs from 2001's *White Blood Cells* followed: "Dead Leaves and the Dirty Ground," "Hotel Yorba" and "I'm Finding It Harder to Be a Gentleman." Then the set diversified, bouncing between albums and ultimately evenly spanning their recorded history: from their eponymous debut to this year's *Elephant*.

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The songs blurred like the years and spoken words slurred into one another, and the whole thing slowly turned into a bunch of electro pseudo-blues gobbledy gook. But when the crowd settled down about an hour into the ninety-minute show, the band's flaws really started to show.

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Meg's simplistic skin-pounding, her child-like delivery and coy posturing resemble a stunt more than they suggest unique technique or talent. Even the White Stripes' positioning onstage — Jack frequently singing incoherently into a mike behind the drums, Meg playing directly to him at all times — suggested as much. The only thing that made her a better choice than a drum machine was her partner's ability to control her tempo without physically pushing a button. Well, she's cute, too.

With the magic of multi-tracking, the White Stripes' albums are full enough to squeak by as complete; the raw minimalism comes off as edgy rather than lacking. Some tunes, like "Yorba Hotel" and "I Want to be the Boy that Warms Your Mother's Heart," withstood the live strip-down. And Meg shone on her sultry vocal showcase "In the Cold Cold Night." But too many songs sounded downright thin.

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As Jack claimed during a two-song encore that ended with Leadbelly's "Boll Weevil," a "Seven Nation Army" might not be able to hold him back. But eventually his apparent aversion to forming a real band might.

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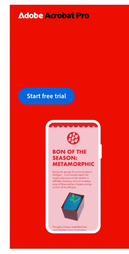

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