



radical sheik

Headlining his first tour, 'Barely Breathing' singer Duncan Sheik is leaving audiences breathless

DUNCAN SHEIK should be feeling great. The single "Barely Breathing" from his eponymous debut CD is inching toward *Billboard's* top 10; he's got a song on the soundtrack of the upcoming Val Kilmer movie *The Saint*; he's just started his first headlining tour; and on this particular afternoon he's readying for his March 3 debut on David Letterman's *Late Show*.

But an attack of bronchitis has left Sheik barely breathing, making him a little hoarse and everyone around him a little nervous. "It's *very* annoying," he jokes about all the fuss over his health. "They're sending me to get herbal wraps and massages and facials, and I'm like, C'mon, I'm a *guitar player*."

The 26-year-old Sheik strolls casually through lower Manhattan discussing a career course that's downright subversive by conventional hype-machine standards: no prerelease hoopla; no wacky videos; no soundtrack single that overshadows his album à la Lisa Loeb (an old friend with whom he performed briefly in college). Instead, he simply recorded an intimate collection of chamber pop with the vulnerability of Nick Drake and the maturity of the Blue Nile. Strong reviews led to

good press, which led to radio play, just the way the music gods are supposed to have intended.

Born in New Jersey, Sheik was raised in South Carolina by his mother when his parents divorced, and encouraged musically by his maternal grandmother. "When I was four," he remembers, "I would sit down at the piano and improvise musical nonsense, and she'd say, 'Oh, it's amazing.'" Yet, he says, he's always been self-conscious about his reedy voice. "I didn't start singing [publicly] until I was in college, and then only in the Brown University recording studio," he says. Now, after studying with a classically trained singer and touring with Jewel, Sheik feels more confident.

SOUNDS

His music is intimate—"I don't write fiction," he says, admitting that his manager still prods him to look at the audience more while performing.

Now living in Manhattan with the girlfriend who inspired his album's romantic yearnings, Sheik is scheduled to shoot a video with director Todd Oldham before hitting the road again on his club tour. He'll perform in Denver March 31.

He's excited—and a little nervous—about being the top act. "It was nice to get pleasantly surprised audiences who assumed they were getting a bad grunge band," he says. "Now, they're like, 'Show me the goods!'" —*Michael Giltz*

WALL FLOWER: Duncan makes musical introspection chic

CARPENTER: MEAKER/ALL ACTION/RETNA LTD.; SHEIK (GROOMING): CHRISTIAN BURMAN FOR ROSSANNE RENFRON