

TIMELY SIGNS, SOULFUL SIGHTS

The Republican Convention in Dallas was as mindless a celebration of cartoon values as any AC/DC concert. The high point of the entire mean, self-congratulatory event came, for this reporter, in its final moments when **Ray Charles** delivered a breathtaking rendition of "America the Beautiful," which bled, confessed and soared. As anyone who has read his brazen autobiography, *Brother Ray*, knows, this is a man who celebrates adultery and makes no excuses for having enjoyed a decade of heroin addiction. Watching this lustful leviathan serenading the New Right was astonishing.

I was reminded of that moment recently in San Francisco at the opening of another branch of the Hard Rock Cafe—a Chuck E. Cheese for grown-ups with art direction straight out of *Grease*—a benefit for the worthy San Francisco Art Institute that was jammed with a reptilian crowd of predatory coffee-achievers, drawn by the promise of a premier S.F. performance by **Cyndi Lauper**. She rose to the occasion with assured singing and lots of brash, wacky flounce, but the show's telling moment came with her cover of **The Brains'** brilliant "Money Changes Everything." The song lays a chilling curse on the malignant power of wealth, but the yuppie crowd at the Hard Rock bellowed the chorus as if it meant "Money justifies everything."

People hear what they want to, and the notion of rock's subversive powers may be both contradicted and complemented by that fact. I remember one wrong-headed gay DJ who refused to play the Gang of Four's anti-militaristic, anti-macho song "I Love a Man in a Uniform" because he didn't get it. The creep wouldn't recognize irony if it peed on his shoe. He figured that his audience heard what he did, and maybe he was right. I hope not.

When Ray Charles rent the stuffed smugness in that convention hall, few probably guessed at the righteous horror in his patriotism. For those of us who did, the moment was particularly charged. The renegade nerve he touched is the same one that inspired **Gerri Hirshey** to write her spectacular new book, *Nowhere to Run, The Story of Soul Music* (Times Books, \$17.95). For Hirshey, revelation struck when she first saw **James Brown** on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. She writes, "Watching him dance inflicted a momentary, ecstatic paralysis... which I can't say I've outgrown." Hirshey saw soul as a hidden route out of the suffocating Eisenhower era. For blacks trapped in unforgiving ghettos and for white youths cradled by bloodless prosperity, soul was an exhilarating cry of self-discovery and self-invention.

Hirshey tracked down the heroes of her youth: the often invisible or mysterious people behind those illuminating soul hits. She finds them today and shares their histories and intimate recollections. The flavor of the book is less analytical history than investigative girl-talk, but Hirshey's eye for the telling detail and her ear for the heart of her subjects' stories illuminate gossip with real insight.

For Hirshey, soul was done in by disco—an arguable notion—but a major change came with artists' demands for independence from the production line. The premier Motown mannequin, **Diana Ross**, and the premier disco diva, **Donna**



Diana Ross: flash but no thunder

Summer, both made those moves. Both have new LPs out that aren't liable to inflict any momentary, ecstatic paralysis.

Cats Without Claws (Geffen) reunites Summer with fellow reborn Christian Michael Omartian, who collaborated on last year's triumphant *She Works Hard for Her Money*. The results are more respectable than spectacular, and worse at their most ambitious. "Supernatural Love"—sort of a "She Works Hard Part 2"—is fine, generic Donna, as is the second cut; "Eyes" works as a spooky samba that sounds like a cautionary tale on the dangers of *Dynasty* addiction; while "I'm Free" boasts a great strutting bass line and calypso chorus. On the other hand, her cover of **The Drifter's** "There Goes My Baby" is an overblown and underfelt excuse for a video; "Oh Billy Please" is a piece of histrionic nonsense; "Forgive Me" (her grand religious gesture) is dire; and the self-penned "Maybe It's Over" is awful: pinched and melodramatic.

Swept Away (RCA) is only better than Ross' last, *Pieces of Ice*, because that was a total disaster. Her botch of Fontella Bass' 1965 hit "Rescue Me" is unforgivable, drained of all its thunder. The boys from **Chic** offer "Telephone," which doesn't belong in the same town with their earlier hit "Upside Down," and there is even an inexplicable cut co-written by **Robby Benson**, which sounds like an unhappy marriage of **Joni Mitchell** and **Duran, Duran**. The only two successes are the title cut, penned by Daryl Hall and tricked up with every gimmick **Arthur Baker** can muster, and—if you go for that kind of thing—the obligatory duet with **Julio Iglesias**. As usual, Ross has a stellar roster of talent on hand to help, but the LP should have been called *Thrown Away*.

Finally, **David Bowie**—master of disguise, irony and pop—has a new LP, *Tonight* (EMI-America), hitting the stores, accompanied by a 22-minute video, *Jaz-zin' for Mr. Blue Jean*: a Walter Mitty-esque romp in which Bowie plays both the unadorned hapless nerd Vic, and Vic's hero—the terminal poseur rocker, Screaming Lord Byron, bedecked in ornate drag and makeup. Bowie takes delightful aim at his own past and at the pretentious fashion-creatures he has done so much to inspire. The video was directed by Julian Temple, whose previous credits include the Sex Pistols' *Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, the band ABC's mini-thriller *Mantrap*, and the Stones' lurid *Undercover of the Night* video. Some are already suggesting that the LP is little more than an excuse for the video, which may be a sign of the times.

—Adam Block