

BY ADAM BLOCK

Sure, it's sick. **Marvin Gaye**, who illuminated and then transcended the Motown formula; who staged a stunning comeback last year with "Sexual Healing," the most deliciously erotic song I've heard since Bette Midler's version of "Do You Wanna Dance," got nailed with a shiny pistol by his minister father a day short of the singer's 45th birthday.

It was exhilarating and poignant to hear Gaye again, played all over the radio dial; it was also quite telling to hear his music on generally lily-white play lists. But pop springs eternal, and a few days after his death, I flicked the dial to hear a Valley Girl-type pout over a B-52s-like riff—"My best friend's gone on a shooting spree! Stop it Debbie. You're embarrassing me"—and I cracked up.

So chalk it up as two arguments for gun control, or as dumb pop coincidence. But while you're shopping for Gaye's landmark LPs, *Anthology* (Motown), and *Midnight Love* (CBS), track down "The Homecoming Queen's Got A Gun" (Buller/JEM) by **Julie Brown**. Forget "The Curly Shuffle" and Al Yankovitch's "Eat It" LP. This is the novelty number of the year. The A-side, "I Like Them Big And Stupid," is a good idea that doesn't work. There is hope that Brown has a lot more to offer. But follow-ups are notoriously tough.

The Go-Gos know, for sure. They were all the rage in '82 and spent the last two years working on their third LP. *Talk Show* (IRS) is the payoff. They traded in their brash, wacky innocence, and all they come up with was a pastiche of borrowed rock riffs and aimless lyrics. The band's members said that they meant this to have a "tough" sound, but every lunge after grit or rage sounds like an anxious rustling of petticoats. Producer Martin Rushent engineers a compressed sound—all bright and tinny—which proves to be about as helpful as a bowling ball on a golf course.

It is ironic that the girl groups of the '60s (controlled as they were by their producers) sounded so much more independent and engaged than do the Go-Gos on this LP, on which they ran the show and wrote all of their own material. Most of their predecessors were given songs and settings; the best of them seized the time and made those songs their own.

Laura Nyro was one of the first of the breed of singer/songwriters who broke free of that tradition. She schooled herself in girl-group R&B, then fashioned something original: tough, personal, audacious songs that were sassy with lust and gladly inebriated. In the late '60s and early '70s cover versions of her songs scaled the charts: The Fifth Dimension popularized "Stone Soul Picnic," "Sweet Blindness" and "Wedding Bell Blues"; Three Dog Night hit it with "Eli's Coming" and Babs Streisand had her turn with "Stoney End."

That winning streak ended in 1971. After four often astonishing LPs, Nyro, who for years had adamantly refused to perform, all but vanished from the music scene. Between 1975 and '78 she released three LPs, weaker efforts which stirred less and less interest. Now, after a six-year hiatus, she is

back with *Mother's Spiritual* (CBS); after 1978's dismal *Nested*, fans may count this new effort as a reprieve. The engaging ferocity of her early work is not present here, but the voice and instincts are intact. Fans will appreciate this friendly post card from a happy mother. It's nice, and about as exciting as recent Carole King records.

Laurie Anderson has no trouble with performing, but it's not too likely that La Streisand, or anyone else, will cover Anderson's idiosyncratic work. Her multimedia performance pieces predated her role as a pop sensation following the release of her sly, terrifying single, "O Superman." Her subsequent debut LP, *Big Science*, was most like a comedy album; a soundtrack to her performance pieces that suffered without the visuals.

For her new *Mr. Heartbreak* (Warner Bros.) Anderson enlisted some terrific musicians, including Peter Gabriel, Nile Rodgers, Adrian Belew and Bill Laswell. She emerges again as a quizzical, bemused narrator and conjurer but also as a musician, which ain't to say that any of these cuts are real toe-tappers.

Three of the seven cuts are standouts: "Sharkey's Days," and "Sharkey's Night" (the latter narrated by author William Burroughs), open and close the album, respectively; and she has collaborated well with Peter Gabriel on "Excellent Birds." These pieces deal in promises eluded, in the magical qualities that emerge from the ordinary, and touch on premonition and misapprehension. A listener will feel more haunted than hooked by these creations. Anderson delights in the deceptiveness of appearances, familiar turf to most gays.

When *Shadows on a Dime* (Lucy) by **Ferron** arrived, I have to admit that I shuddered. This is the Canadian folk singer's fourth LP but the first to come my way. It is being distributed by Redwood Records. I thought, good God—not more Women's Music? I mean, own up: This stuff is insipid, preachy and self-congratulatory and should be filed under "self-help." I wasn't anxiously awaiting the latest hymnal for lesbian hootenannies.

Apparently Ferron isn't either. She is a raw-voiced original and the most interesting new artist to emerge in a decade of Women's Music. Ferron doesn't match Chris Williamson's clarion pipes or Holly Near's contagious bravado. In fact, she is most reminiscent of John Prine: understated, reflective and rustic—not an easy listen but a compelling one. Her songs bypass easy euphoria, finger-pointing and banner-raising. With a wry, earned strength she sings, "And it's everyone's secret and muttered refrain / that for all of our trouble we be lonely again."

The record opens with an accusation from within the memory of a relationship she had with a woman who was also involved with a man—unsuccessful all round, as fear won out over love. The album closes with the anthemic opus "It Won't Take Long." Throughout, Ferron crosses poignant and painful territory, keeping a dry personal mysticism intact. She is still on that journey, and word has it that her live shows outstrip the record, so keep an ear out. Pop isn't the only thing that springs eternal.