

POP MUSIC

BY ADAM BLOCK

By all pharmacological rights, Joe Cocker should have keeled over years ago. He burst onto the scene in 1969 with a voice all sandpaper and heart: "You Are So Beautiful" crested in 1975, and he didn't dent the charts again until last year—when he brought grit and glory to Jennifer Warnes' sturdy plaint on "Up Where We Belong."

Capitol Records has hopes to repeat that success; the result is *Civilized Man*, an LP that tries too hard to tame the beast. Cocker is in astonishing voice here, but in place of a band to pace him he is lumbered with the anonymous expertise of session hands. Producer Gary Katz (Steely Dan) sabotages Side 1 with sappy, urbane arrangements. Producer Stewart Levine (Cruaders, Womack and Womack), brings a fat propulsive sound to Side 2, but the material is weak. Cocker sings with a thrilling desperation, charged with hope, but he needs a crack band and a slightly less civilized producer.

Remember *The Cars*? Way back in 1978 they were the Boston combo who proved that New Wave could be commercial. Astonishing. Leader Ric Ocasek was like a candy-coated David Byrne, casting cool desperation against brittle, beguiling pop. They were hailed as an American Roxy Music. Arty, huh? Well, Ocasek didn't turn out to be a visionary stylist like Bryan Ferry but a first-rate craftsman. And one who takes his time.

Heartbreak City (Elektra) is the group's first LP in three years, and it breaks no new ground, neither does it yield any. Ocasek struts his signature sound: caught, edgy vocals, worried and claustrophobic in the midst of bright harmonies and spacious arrangements. Neither passion nor panic ever threaten to overwhelm expertise. The first singles, "You Might Think" and "Magic" show the band still has a sure touch. More will doubtless follow.

The *Thompson Twins* are proving to be another hit machine. Their third LP, *Into the Gap* (Arista), has already spawned two big MTV/dance hits—"Doctor, Doctor" and "Hold Me"—and the third single, the Celtic/ealypso reel "You Take Me Up," is already topping English charts. The trio is shaping up as this season's pop sensation. Its members are quick studies of the Culture Club school of musical cannibalism: borrowing from a grab bag of folk and ethnic musics and whipping them into wide-screen productions.

Cute as they are, I'd opt for Bob Dylan's daughter's favorite band: the *Psychedelic Furs*. She is such a fan, her dad has written a song for the group, which they plan to cut. Meanwhile we have *Mirror Moves* (CBS). Two years after their *Forever Now* LP, the Furs have returned with a disc produced by Keith Forsey, whose credits include Billy Idol and the *Footloose* soundtrack. There is a bigger change though. Lead singer/songwriter Richard Butler has softened his pained, sarcastic drawl and is singing with less rancor and more confidence. It seems the lad has fallen in love—and made a great album in the bargain.

Three songs on Side 1—the luscious, caroling "Ghost in You"; the cascading, poig-

nant "Heaven"; and the Euro/disco-hooked "Heartbeat"—were hits on release. "Here Come Cowboys" offers sentiments true to the Summer of Love, while facing down Reagan: "All we really need is love. And here come cowboys." It's a delight. Only the last three cuts on Side 2 falter seriously. But *Mirror Moves* has already made my Top Ten list.

R.E.M. were the cult sensation of 1983; the group was voted best new band in the *Rolling Stone's* critics poll. With expectations high, the band has aptly named its second LP *Reckoning* (IRS). Any good? Just the best LP by an American band so far this year. This is ringing, suggestive, rough-hewn music, lit by half-remembered chords and harmonies from the '60s. It is the sound of a ferocious and tender innocence from four youths raised by a radio tuned to the Byrds, the Who and the Velvet Underground.

There is sexual confusion here. On "Seven Chinese Brothers" Michael Stipe sings, "The smell of short-haired boy-woman . . . offers to take him out." And, as if in a gender-preference dilemma on "Pretty Persuasion," he calls, "She's got / Pretty persuasion. / He's got / Pretty persuasion. / God damn / this confusion." The single, "South Carolina Rain," and the Gene-Autry-on-mescaline lament, "Don't Go Back to Rockville," are standouts, but the whole disc delivers. When Stipe closes the LP singing, "Jefferson, I think we're lost," it is the sound of someone facing new territory—framed by regret but full of risky adventure.

The Smiths have been touted as this year's R.E.M., or the cult band that matters. The group offers quite a mystique: There is the bland name, the players' "no style" look, sparse arrangements and oblique-to-opaque lyrics about shattered romance and chronic discomfort. And, of course, there are the picture sleeves, featuring Jean Cocteau's favorite hunk, Jean Marais, and Warhol's ditto, Joe Dallasandro; and the suggestive lyrics—particularly to their first single, "This Charming Man"—which suggest that they are gay subversives, an image that lead singer Morrissey has been quick to spurn.

Well, with the release of their debut LP, *The Smiths* (Sire), the point is nearly moot. There are three standout cuts—all upbeat and danceable: "This Charming Man," "What Difference Does It Make" and "Reel Around the Fountain." Along with the blue-and-magenta cover shot of a shirtless Dallasandro with his head bowed, these songs are ample reason to want the LP. Unfortunately, you'll also get a load of blurred poetics, muted folk-rock harmonies and Morrissey's pained, deadpan warble, all of which tends to descend into studied, self-conscious melodrama.

You might be better off with guitarist Steve Tibbett's *Bye Bye Safe Journey* (ECM). No controversy here, just grand atmospheric horizons, the kind of LP Brian Eno might have made using Jimi Hendrix. It is populated by the thudding, chiming, rustling and rumbling of bass, vase, congas and tabla as well as a distant explosive guitar, lustrous phrases and delicate lyricism. We are talking designer music here: perfect for opening up the summer place.