

POP MUSIC

BY ADAM BLOCK

Ten years ago, **Bruce Springsteen** was crowned "rock 'n' roll future," even before he'd come close to the Top 10. In 1975, he delivered the goods with his third album, *Born to Run*, and a string of engrossing, astonishingly athletic performances that became the stuff of legends. If *Darkness on the Edge of Town* was ponderous, *The River* was full of beat, rage, rasp and humor—and Springsteen slew the stadium-sized crowds. His radical follow-up, *Nebraska*, offered bleak portraits of broken men and promises in an unforgiving landscape, and was recorded solo at his home.

With *Born in the USA* (CBS), Springsteen is back with an upbeat set, but it is a pretty flimsy triumph. After invoking American dreams of freedom, and the curses they carry, Springsteen reaches back here, back to the impulse to dream. But in this case it is a retreat robbed of that tension between dread and desire that has driven and redeemed his earlier melodramas. Here we get a series of precious vignettes inflated with bombast and bravado, riding a pared-down, "generic" version of his trademark band sound. The LP suffers from a cute, contrived quality that recalls Studs Terkel at his most earnest.

The ballads that close sides 1 and 2 are effective, but musically and lyrically he's said these things before, and better. The winning single, "Dancing in the Dark" (available in a 12-inch dance remix by Arthur Baker), and the cover shot of Bruce's butt are the album's principal assets.

Another great white hope, **Elvis Costello**, checks in with *Goodbye Cruel World* (CBS), sabotaging powerful songs with busy, tepid renditions. After the ambitions of *Imperial Bedroom* and the brisk, witty craft of *Punch the Clock*, this is Costello in a cocoon: withdrawing from the irony and venom of his lyrics behind gentle, pudgy arrangements, his singing shorn of urgency, struggle and threat, all in frustrating contrast to the versions I heard him do of these same songs on a recent solo tour. I don't know a Costello album that hasn't rewarded repeated listening. I'd hate to think that this one is his most listenable—and forgettable—to date. Hear it, but go see the man live. This disc out, he's not doing himself justice.

With *New Sensations* (RCA), **Lou Reed** offers his most successful pop record in a decade. Reed is a perverse, romantic, original—one of pop's most influential figures. His "Walk on the Wild Side" laconically celebrated transvestites, junkies and hustlers on Top 40 radio. After pushing pop past the limits of commercialism with *Metal Machine Music* (four sides of noise) and later *Take No Prisoners* (a live LP that should be filed with Lenny Bruce outtakes), Reed emerged as a reborn heterosexual, singing "I love women. We all love women" on 1982's *The Blue Mask*.

New Sensations is the answer to **Billy Joel's** ersatz recreations of stylized '60s pop. Reed goes back to those roots, not to mimic or cannibalize but as touchstones,

reclaiming a source of inspiration (in doo-wop, girl group, and garage jams) that inspired songs like "Sweet Jane." He delivers sweet, tough delights. Check out the single "I Love You Suzanne." There's more where that came from.

Tina Turner hasn't had a real album to boast of in the 10 years since she split from Ike. A couple of years back, a pair of English New Wavers used her on a techno-pop remake of "Ball of Confusion," the strongest cut on their *B.E.F. Anthology*. The team clicked this year with a stunning cover of **Al Green's** "Let's Stay Together." The follow-up LP, *Private Dancer* (Capitol), enlarges on that triumph and, working with four different producers, Turner finally gets her due.

The follow-up single, "What's Love Got to Do With It," is worthy of top-flight Deniece Williams. Turner takes the propulsive Elton John-on-methedrine rocker "Steel Claw" and swallows it whole, with ace guitarist Jeff Beck lunging magnificently in her wake. The title cut by **Dire Straits'** leader **Mark Knopfler** is a hooker's lament. Turner gives it a dose of **Esther Phillips** on the pathos, before leaping an octave into vengeful raunch. Heart and grit like this make **Grace Jones'** tough posturing sound pretty silly.

The feminists at Olivia Records, taking a page from gay disco labels, have issued a 12-inch by **Alicia** ("I Love the Nightlife") **Bridges** called "Under Cover of Darkness" b/w "Not Ready Yet" (for monogamy, by the way) on its subsidiary label (Second Wave). The notion of disco divas springing from a feminist label is delightful.

Meanwhile, **David Lasley**, a sweet soul singer falsetto white boy, delivers the follow-up to his winning debut LP, *Takin' Twenty Grand*. The new album, *Raindance* (EMI-America), is—if anything—more openly gay (it's dedicated to his lover) than the first forthright LP. His vocal style is somewhere between **Sylvester** and **Laura Nyro**. Lasley could put a more gutsy claim on his "lead singing," and someone should take his tough gay rap ("Don't Smile At Me. I Already Know") over to Sugarhill for a remix with a truly funky bass line. Lasley is one of the only artists in pop who hasn't made a media event out of his sexuality while expressing it so freely in his lyrics. Check him out.

A final note: *Purple Rain* (Warner Bros.) is the best LP I've heard in '84. **Prince's** soundtrack to the film recalls the pure invention of **Sly Stone** and **Hendrix** as much as their licks, but **Todd Rundgren**, **The Carter Family**, **Devo**, **Steely Dan**, even **Jeff Barry** and **Laurie Anderson** also come to mind. Prince incorporates and reinvents his influences as deftly as he shifts from the sacred to the secular, or shivers from poignant to salacious.

"When Doves Cry," the LP's first single, is already topping the pop, black, and dance charts in its sixth week of release. (It took "Billy Jean" a lot longer to make that climb.) Clubs are moving on to "Take Me With U" and "Baby I'm a Star." Don't worry about Michael Jackson; Prince is the great black contender.