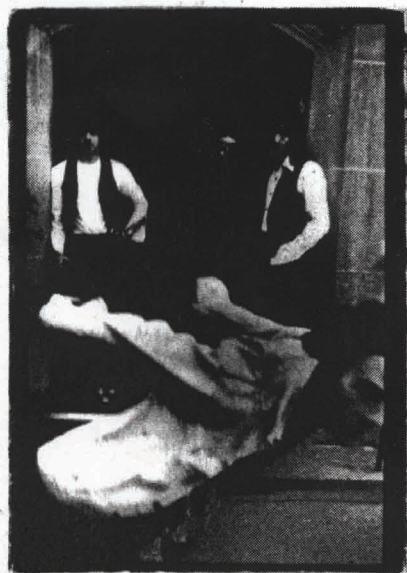


BAD BOYS AND VINYL TRICKS

Many Faces of Halloween

by ADAM BLOCK

These days, folks are a lot more interested in Michael Jackson the enigma—the apparition—than in the music on his new album, *Bad* (Epic). There is his pancake pallor, that new buttocks chin he's commissioned, and the chimp who shares his bedroom—emblems of a racial and sexual ambivalence that have turned him into something like the Pee Wee



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R.E.M. rebounds with triumphant *Document*.

Herman of funk. Of course, Pee Wee is kidding. Michael is *really* weird. And everyone wonders: Does the guy have a clue?

His sex life is a universal eyebrow raiser and grist for widespread homophobic slagging. Even homos get boggled: When he opened his new LP snarling, "Your butt is mine," and brazened around in his video making clit-tickling grabs for his own crotch, homos of my acquaintance screamed in disbelief. And you don't have to be Vito Russo to wonder why the prep-school best friend in the video was played by an actor last cast as the horny homotwinkie in *Parting Glances*.

One friend roared, "Can you believe? And white as a sheet soaked in Clorox!"

"Not white," I suggested, "designer mauve."

Such rabid speculation upsets the star, who wrote a deliciously unhinged missive to the press during his tour of Japan, confessing that he was hurt by all the talk and announcing that he has been "sent" as a gift to the children of the world.

Jackson's unsettling ambiguity provides those teens with a subversive gift and, hopefully, with inspiration. Like that it's OK to live with a baboon. Beneath that lies a more sobering suggestion: His compulsive evasions of racial and sexual stereotypes provide an indictment of their horrific power over a man of even Jackson's immense wealth and talent. Folks argue about whether his is a triumph of self-denial or of self-invention. In fact it is both. Jackson seems to feel that you can't be black, queer, a genius, and an international star, so he has retooled himself, hoping to supersede those categories but managing to make them only that much more prominent in his public's mind.

If the album is less interesting than the enigma, that is because it begs all questions—except that his talent is intact. If it lacks *Thriller*'s blockbuster singles, it is more musically consistent, and Jackson's singing, particularly on "Man in the Mirror," is new and stunning. If you haven't bought it already, I'd suggest you catch it on the radio: keep up with the epoch in *People*.

In other news: The openly gay **Tom Robinson Band** celebrated their seminal hit "2-4-6-8 Motorway" by reuniting for one night to play a London gig on the tenth anniversary of its release. **The Smiths** are no more, since guitarist **Johnny Marr** left and joined **The Pretenders**. The band's farewell LP, *Strangeways Here We Come* (Sire), suggests that the team was running out of steam. Only the hilariously catchy "Girlfriend in a Coma," the pummeling "Stop Me if You've Heard This One Before," and the *Prick Up Your Ears*-like savage gay love-threat "Death at Your Elbow" are up to snuff. Future plans for singer Morrissey, queen of the wounded brats, remain unknown.

For a delightful disc by an unashamed screamer, track down the EP *Angels in Pain* (Rough Trade) by **Princess Tynymeat**. The pale, torrid youth—who took his name from Monty Clift's rumored handle on the gay orgy circuit—sings archly and sweetly on one cut, "I've got a tape measure. . . . It'll tell how much I like you," intoned over a tight and twiggly disco beat.

Prince sometimes seems like the Nor-

man Lear of R&B, but his latest find, **Taja Sevelle**, ranks as his best of the year. On her debut LP, *Taja Sevelle* (Paisley Park), Prince contributes only one cut while she tours through Laura Nyro, Kid Creole, and Teena Marie—it's country with rhythm and assurance to burn.

The same can't be said for the two white girls who formerly backed Prince as members of The Revolution. *Wendy & Lisa* (CBS) finds the two with ex-Rev drummer Bobby Z on a shoddy, derivative collection of half-baked throwaways that never should have been pressed into vinyl. Prince had *nothing* to do with this embarrassment. In fact, once he hears it he may want to rip the ladies' names out of his address book.

The British dance-fave duo **Erasure**, featuring **Vince Clarke** and the heroic gay vocalist **Andy Bell**, is due to have its last LP, *Circus* (Sire), reissued as a two-LP set featuring all-new remixes of every cut. The LP and first single (the inspired coming-out account "Hideaway") are due out on Nov. 18.

Gay lefties **Jimmy Somerville** and **Richard Coles** of **The Communards** bow in with a hi-NRG knockout, "Tomorrow (I'm Leaving You)" (London/UK), a lover's kiss-off from the falsetto whiz. Don't miss the Motown-glossy, grand-camp B side, "I Just Want to Let You Know." Both bode well for the group's upcoming LP.

Lesbian flattop folkie **Phranc** is finally planning a return to the studio to lay down tracks for her long-awaited second LP. Victor DeLorenzo of the Violent Femmes is slated to help produce the disc in Minneapolis this winter.

ABC, the Euro-gloss children of Roxy Music, return from an illness-induced sabbatical with *Alphabet City* (Polygram). The single "When Smokey Sings" was an impeccable dance-floor confection; it's worth tracking down in place of the LP, which sinks into glossy monotony. . . .

There is progress from old-timer **Mick Jagger** with his *Primitive Cool* (CBS), after the flimsy songwriting and jerk-off blackface of his first solo LP. Jagger has polished up a tough, assured portfolio that stretches well beyond his MBA-aerobics anthem "Let's Work" without ever matching the Stones' finest hours. Jagger still seizes songs like a delighted legend, particularly on the unlikely title cut.

Tough, throbbing, hypnotic pop marks *Darklands* (Warner Bros.) by **The Jesus & Mary Chain**, which finds the upstart Brit brothers dropping the feedback that snarled across their debut LP to unveil tunes that leave echoes in the dust. One of the year's best LPs—a find.

And, finally, **R.E.M.** rebounds from this summer's shoddy collection of B sides and outtakes with their rough-hewn, triumphant LP *Document* (IRS). Michael Stipe's cracked critiques unwind as the band wallops over echoes of The Byrds and The Velvets. Side 1 has the treasures and Side 2 trails off gnarly. If this isn't the best LP by America's finest band, it is surely their most fun. ■

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