



POP MUSIC

# MUSIC, MEMPHIS AND MICHAEL JACKSON'S BONES

by ADAM BLOCK

**H**ad to face it, folks: This was not shaping up as the most scintillating of seasons for pop music—not when the big event was the 20th anniversary release of *Sgt. Pepper's* on CD. To escape the scent of embalming fluid, the Pop Music Desk set off on a butt-busting trek through Memphis, Washington, D.C., and St. Louis, paced, as always, by heart-stopping suspense over when Michael Jackson will release his follow-up to *Thriller*.

First stop was the promised land. Memphis Mark and I had been called up for culinary jury duty, as judges in the 10th Annual International Bar-B-Que Contest. Fueled with the finest of whiskey and intentions, we undertook the mission. Music wasn't the first order of business, but in Memphis it's as inescapable as the weather. Memphis was the birthplace of Sun Records in the '50s, Stax/Volt in the '60s and Hi in the early '70s. After a decade-long dry spell, locals are struggling to kick-start the place back into a being recording destination.

Driving through the blasted, ghost-ridden metropolis, we passed Ardent studios, where **Jim Dickinson** recently produced **Green On Red's** haunting noir-a-billy LP, *The Killer Inside Me* (Mercury), and **The Replacements'** latest—the ragged, romantic, yearning thrash-event *Pleased To Meet Me* (Warner Bros.)—assisted by twisted local legend **Alex Chilton**. A former firehouse painted a preposterous shade of purple houses **Chips Moman's** new Three Alarm Studio. Moman was the gasoline-sniffing white-trash renegade producer (he sports matching prison-tattoos: a blood-red heart on one arm and "Memphis" on the other) who helped create Stax and Muscle Shoals, and co-wrote the classics "Do Right Woman" and "Dark End of the Street."

A long-overdue anthology of **James Carr's** love-shattered revelations, (*At The Dark End of the Street* (Blue Side) has just been released. It features the awesome "Pouring Water on a Drowning Man" that **Elvis Costello** has been known to cover, and the original—unsurpassed—version of Moman's title tune. It is a grand gash of

history (1965-69), because James Carr is a narcoleptic shell these days, living in a South Memphis housing project.

**Chips Moman**, though, is back at work—recently cutting sides with **Ringo Starr** and having fashioned a solid, gut-bucket-and-neon setting for **Bobby Womack** on *Womagic* (MCA), the toughest, most soulful, hard-core R&B record of the year to date.

Of course the biggest ghost in Memphis is Elvis. His presence rides like an undertow beneath any pilgrim's visit, and crops up strange as blood blossoming from a snow-bank—or the punch line to a dirty joke. At the sweltering Q-fest grounds a team from Graceland was competing as the Love Me Tenderloins. Another booth blasted **Dwight Yoakum's** branch-water-vocal, L.A.-honky-tonk arrangement of the King's "Little Sister"—sounding as slick and winning on the banks of the Mississippi as it had in San Francisco's cocksucker cowboy bar, Rawhide Two. At a third booth, fatsos in leisure suits were doing Blues Brothers routines to Otis Redding records in front of an iridescent tapestry of Elvis' face. Mark and I paid an obligatory visit to the Graceland shopping mall in search of Elvis Presley bedroom slippers, but were told they had been discontinued. The girl in the store apologized: "I guess somebody thought they were in bad taste."

Mark and I weren't really there for the music this time, and except for a trip to chitlin-circuit heaven with local wonders **The Fieldstones** at Green's Lounge, and then to Blue Velvet roadhouse-hell at Hernandez's Hideaway, we mostly got finger-

Musical highlights at San Francisco's recent "Aid & Comfort" AIDS benefit included stirring performances by (left to right) Linda Ronstadt, Bobby McFerrin and Shirley MacLaine.

lickin' greased, and stumbled around like a couple of surprised tortoises in the heat.

I jetted on solo to Washington, D.C., where I found those Elvis slippers. It was at the American Bookseller's Association Convention, where 10 years after his death Elvis exists as an industry. Books abound, including a seemingly semi-psychotic fantasy by the woman who claims to have mothered Elvis' love-child—sort of a *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean* come to life. But the big kahuna was *Elvis World*, a coffee-table tome of Elvis-a-bilia that Knopf will publish in August. It was authored by Jane and Michael Stern (who made their mark with a series of precious and misleading paens to blue-collar cuisine). Whatever else they may have missed, they got those foam slippers, with the Barbie-doll-sized, ascot-tied Elvis heads bobbing on each toe, the eyes permanently out of focus.

There were other music books at the convention. **Chuck Berry** was pushing his autobiography, due from Harmony in October. Though Chuck looked great, the book seems destined to tell little. **Barry Manilow** caused a mini traffic jam on behalf of his memoir *Sweet Life: Adventures on the Way to Paradise*, which promises to reveal even less.

I wonder if they'll carry it at Lambda Rising, the superb local bookstore whose stock is *exclusively* gay and lesbian oriented. On

my way out, a reviewer should be shot." We fled at intermission.

The next day the reviewer, Lon Tuck, died at age 49 of a freak coronary. Criticism is a treacherous trade. It was time to leave town.

The Pop Music Desk ripped through St. Louis as fast as a boisterous family wedding would allow. I ducked into a punk-lesbian record store where they were playing **Tammy Faye Bakker** records, but didn't have time to visit **Chuck Berry's** theme park. There was a Rock Against AIDS benefit at the Chase Park Plaza Hotel, featuring local bands. It was held in a seedy ballroom on a sweltering Sunday afternoon, and local organizers were livid when no one showed up.

I jetted back to San Francisco, in time to see the thing done right. The cream of San Francisco's restaurant community spent a year and a half organizing "Aid & Comfort," their June 8 benefit for those stricken with AIDS, and **Michael Smuin**, **Bill Graham** and **Tom Luddy** agreed to help with the entertainment. Food at the sit-down, nine-course dinner for 1,040 was smashing, and the entertainment kept pace; one hour was broadcast live on KQED.

Musical highlights included **Linda Ronstadt's** soaring rendition of "Desperado," as she lassoed the high note, squeezing it until it shone like a diamond; **Bobby McFerrin**, in a nearly possessed a cappella tear through the *entire* score of *The Wizard of Oz*; a threatening and hilarious rendition of "Purple Haze" by the punk-classicists in the **Kronos String Quartet**; and a massive sing-along of "Lean On Me" led by local a cappella heroes **Chanticleer**. With two Smuin ballet chestnuts, a sharp comedy routine from **Paula Poundstone**, and an unhinged homily from **Shirley MacLaine**, it made for a taut, terrific set. Call your local PBS affiliate and ask them to acquire the show. It's great viewing, and will fatten the take of an event that had raised more than \$300,000 by the night's end.

I was feeling pretty upbeat the next day when I read that **Michael Jackson**, after having been thwarted in his incredibly squirrely attempt to buy the Elephant Man's skeleton from a British medical museum (and persuaded by neighbors to give up his plan to buy a giraffe) has finally severed his ties with the apocalyptic *Watchtower* fundamentalists in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I wonder *why*? Maybe now Michael will sign on as a headliner for a Liz Taylor AmFAR benefit, and finally deliver that oft-postponed album. Hang in there, Stinky.

Poor Dave Marsh. He's not even gay, but maybe it will help book sales. The crack seemed appropriate to D.C., though—a city obsessed with appearances—where the media-savvy, the politically ambitious, and worried functionaries all seem to be desperately trying to pass for grown-ups. For most of my stay the climate was indistinguishable from that of a dank, fetid bathhouse, which aptly fit the most closeted city in the country.

Of course there are boho nonconformists, and there is respite for the mischievous. At a \$1-a-head AIDS benefit at the Annex, I met **Jimi Reilly**. He looks like Bill the Cat and is the gay leader of a local band, **Revelation**. He loves Metallica, Anthrax, and heavy-metal boys. He told me I should check out Trax on a Thursday.

That is new-wave night at what may be the best gay bar in the country: a double-disco cavern, with an outdoor white-sand volleyball court and barbecue, and John Hughes teens (drinking age is still 18) mixing it up with little regard to race or gender preference, to the throb of **Dead or Alive**. Very encouraging.

I tried to make the Tammy Faye look-alike contest at JR's, the polo shirt and hustler bar, but missed it. Then I suffered a lapse of judgment. I should've followed my "divas rule" instincts to **Sandra Reaves-Phillips'** show, "The Late Great Ladies of Blues & Jazz"—a one-woman salute to Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington and Mahalia Jackson at the Arena Stage.

Instead, I was swayed by a stone rave review in the *Washington Post* off to the Kennedy Center for a recital of two **Gershwin** brothers plays from the '30s, *Let Them Eat Cake* and *Let My People Sing*, by the Brooklyn Academy of Music. I invited my friend Michael, a sophisticated reporter for the *Post*, to join me. Midway through the first play, as narrator **Jack Gilford** was whining and bumbling like some shrill, dyslexic rabbit, Michael hissed, "That man reached his peak as the Cracker Jack spokesman." I suggested, "Maybe they could have hired Pee Wee Herman to direct." Hopeless. Moments later Michael

shared, "That reviewer should be shot." We fled at intermission.

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