



John Hiatt: gritty, vivid and redemptive

POP MUSIC

THE DISCS OF SUMMER

Salvaged Gems from the Vinyl Jungle

by ADAM BLOCK

Can we melt it? Please!" my friend Memphis Mark pleaded in sweet exasperation, a minute into the disc. It was the new **Donna Summer** single, "Dinner with Gershwin" (Geffen), produced by Richard Perry. Mark is 21 and has *never* been a Donna Summer fan.

He remembers dancing around in his lover's living room, stepping out solo in his underwear, doing poppers to Madonna's "Borderline" when it first came out, feeling like the hippest little trouble-child in Memphis. But when he finally saw *her* megashow this summer, he winced, "It looks like a TV special—an NBC-TV special." The wages of sophistication.

Mark was right about **Madonna's** big-tease vaudeville, and about Summer's new plush Yuppie fluff. The long days of sum-

mer deserved better, or so it seemed. Despite friends who've fallen in love with **Prince's** double album, or **The Cure's**, and despite **U2's** assured triumph, I had to concur with the Memphian's assessment of new pop music this summer: "It's been lame." Luckily, that doesn't mean there's been nothing of interest. Toiling in the vinyl jungles, the Pop Music Desk has salvaged some gems.

It has been a strong season for reissues and worthy pop archaeology, but be careful: It's a minefield out there. Avoid, for instance, *In Dreams*, *The Greatest Hits* (Virgin), on which the mighty **Roy Orbison** offers recently *re-recorded* versions of his catalogue, because the originals are tied up in litigation. Likewise, the Elvis commemorative *Memphis Album* (RCA) has been digitally remastered, stripping the tracks of their original ragged richness. *The*

Complete Sun Sessions (RCA) adds only a series of outtakes that rate as curiosities. Great liner notes on these, but earlier packages delivered the musical goods. Buy from this lot instead:

1) *The Otis Redding Story* (Atco) does itself proud: 60 cuts covering the gospel-gone-soul giant's five-year career. Hear the spawn of Sam Cooke, Little Richard and Elvis ride Stax/Volt into carnal, earned redemption.

2) *Long Gone Lonesome Blues* and *Hey Good Lookin'* (Polydor) represent volumes 5 and 6 (August '49 - July '51) of the complete **Hank Williams**, the spooky voice of sad railways and roadside horror—country music's seminal blues singer. This is the authentic voice behind the neo-traditionalist movement: rank, poignant and chilling.

3) *The Quintessential Billie Holiday*, Vol. 1. 1933-35 (CBS) features an odd lot of obscure early sides that find the great lady already haunting, trapped and rent by promise.

4) *Soul Shots*, volumes 1 through 5 (Rhino), retrieves a mother lode of '60s soul classics and rarities. Though the programming is problematic (packaging is by genre, like "Sweet Soul" and "Soul Shouters"), this represents a wonderful resource.

5) *2400 Fulton Street* (RCA) by the **Jefferson Airplane** gathers the 25 finest cuts of the bent folkies who most successfully fashioned a San Francisco sound. Music the Starship doesn't deserve to obscure: rickety, tender and grand.

6) *Substance 1987* (Qwest) by **New Order** takes four sides and 12 cuts to chronicle their six-year ascent out of Joy Division and onto the dance floor. The tunes are thunderous, anthemic and sly—all except for the dud new cut, "True Faith." Classy and cannily commercial.

And there have been new releases worth tracking down:

1) *Bring the Family*, **John Hiatt** (A&M): Once touted as "America's answer to Elvis Costello," the man put out seven unpersuasive albums and hit rock bottom. This LP, recorded live with Ry Cooder, Nick Lowe and Jim Keltner, finally strikes pay dirt. Cooder hasn't burned garages like this since *Exiles on Main Street*, and Hiatt's performance matches his. Gritty, vivid and redemptive, it's the summer's best disc. Hell, even Memphis Mark spins it silly.

2) *See How We Are*, **X** (Elektra): L.A.'s trouble-couple pick up a new guitarist and go keening towards grown-up glory and regret while burning rubber—sad and shimmering as neon on rain-drenched blacktop.

3) *Strange Weather*, **Marianne Faithful** (Island): Producer Harold Wiltern fashions an eclectic, if occasionally contrived, cabaret set and lets the siren rake her damaged choir-girl pipes over the plaints like a cat grazing luminous through blighted landscapes.

4) *Get Close to My Love*, **Jennifer Holliday** (Geffen): I like my divas with a little more grit, but Holliday has a voice to match her girth, and fans will consider this a return to form.

5) *Trouble Over There*, **Trouble Funk** (Island): Most rap is a recipe for monotony, but the D.C. crew who "Dropped a Bomb on You" tap into mojo-funk and eye-popping collisions.

6) *Three Windows*, **The Modern Jazz Quartet with The New York Chamber Symphony** (Atco): As successful a marriage of jazz and classical music as you're ever liable to find: credit Milt Jackson's unspeakable cool and playful vibes.

7) *Sister*, **Sonic Youth** (SST): Music to eat through the psychic sludge: an exuberant wake-up call from cramped quarters.

8) *Babble*, **That Petrol Emotion** (Polygram): Political rage swamped exquisitely in dreamy thunder: struggling, even danceable.

9) *Fastback...and His Orchestra* (Poplama): Two girls and a guy up in Seattle making careening pop (a la X-Ray Specs circa 1977) that could scare most anything on your radio off the road.

10) *A Letter From St. Paul*, **Silencers** (RCA): U2 meet the Byrds to talk about what's lost and out of reach, and take refuge in embraceable harmonies over strong-pop drums.

Finally a few homo-noteworthyies:

1) *The Singing Rage*, **Christopher Rage**: The porn star proves himself an eclectic-cabaret candidate on a startling 7-song EP. His C&W hoedown is worth the price of the disc. One inspirational lyric: "My face seats two, there's room for you/ And you can even bring a friend along/ So pleased to seat you, I'm Freddie Pig."

2) "Lost in a Dream," **Nick John** (Megatone): This gay 23-year-old Austin dreamboat comes on like the reincarnation of Patrick Cowley; the concept may be dated, the voice a tad flat, but he's definitely the prettiest homo-hunk in disco. Check out the sleeve.

3) "Tunnel Vision," **The Midnight Shift** (Fantasia): A hi-n-r-g 12-inch by British PWA **Ian Grant** (originally the "acrobatic cat" in the UK production of *Cats*), who recruited friends from London's theater scene, in the face of his illness, for this self-produced debut.

4) *Purple Heart*, **Michael Callen**: An enormously exuberant and appealing tape from the New York PWA-activist. From his delightful celebration of "Where the Boys Are," to the brash ACT UP anthem, "Living in Wartime," to his collaboration with Peter Allen and Marsha Malamet on the memorable "Love Don't Need a Reason," this is a remarkable record, waiting to be pressed.

There are a slew of fall releases just out, or due soon, from **Jagger**, **Jackson**, **Mellenkamp**, **Springsteen**, **R.E.M.**, **The Smiths**, **Waits** and **Sting**—for starters. It's nearly time to have Memphis Mark pull on his cowboy boots and fingerless glove, grab his acetylene torch and a case of Pabst Blue Ribbon, and come over for a reviewing session. We'll check in with the survivors. Be one.

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