

## SPRING BREAKS: SIZING UP THE BOYS OF WINTER

by Adam Block

**W**hy don't you rate the records by how well hung the artists are?" my boy-bartender friend Peter grinned. His eyes flashed mischief through mascara that looks better on him than on Pia Zadora. That was Peter's way of being helpful. He knows what we're up against: Springtime — the air takes on a giddy edge, and the record companies start pounding out product.

The onslaught is daunting. If they're not in the store yet, new discs by **The Rolling Stones**, **Husker Du**, **Julian Lennon** and **Bob Seeger** will be cropping up soon. There is a concert-film soundtrack from **Laurie Anderson**, a live digital recording of crisp new pop by **Joe Jackson**, and new LPs due from **The Smiths**, **Culture Club**, **Art of Noise**, **The Whites**, **Big Country**, **Katrina and the Waves**, **Patti LaBelle**, **Lou Reed**, **Arthur Baker**, **Mtume**, **S.O.S. Band**, **Chaka Khan**, **George Clinton**, **Van Halen**, **Pogues** and **Siouxsie and the Banshees** — all elbowing for shelf space. Such abundance makes it tempting to lurch for Peter's ruler. Unfortunately, that measure won't get us too far. I'd wager the butchest of this lot will turn out to be Patti. More to the point, the pressing work is a winter wrap-up.

First, kudos to the **Communards**, ex-Bronski Beat lead singer Jimi Somerville's new duo. They took time out from recording their debut LP to headline a benefit for "Heritage of Pride," the group that organizes New York's Gay Pride Parade. The two wowed a crowd at The Saint in New York with a set of new material, encoring with covers of Thelma Houston's "Don't Leave Me This Way" and Billy Holiday's "Lover Man," which Jimi sang as "Lover Boy." Raise a toast to the soulful socialists.

Pop provocateur John Lydon has scored a coup with *album* (Elektra), by **Pil**. The former Sex Pistols lead singer is getting his first mainstream radio play with "Rise," a Celtic-pop melody (worthy of McCartney) lavished against his throttling magpie vocal. Lydon calls the LP "Thinking man's heavy metal," and makes the conceit stick. His vivid, mongrel chants turn wickedly triumphant, as ex-Cream drummer Ginger Baker lays down a thunderous bottom and ex-Zappa guitarist Steve Vai explodes in blazing, glistening guitar turns. Neither is credited on the purposefully perverse "generic"

package, but listen to the Bowie/Eno languors of the disc-closing "Ease" unfurl into a storming, luminous vortex, and you'll find that Lydon has assembled his most effective accompanists since the demise of the Sex Pistols — once more turning people's expectations of Lydon and pop categories on their heads.

**Elvis Costello** rings the death knell on the persona he rode in on, back in '77, with *King of America* (CBS) by The Costello Show. Moving from national to personal disillusion on the title cut, he sings, "It was a fine idea at the time; now I'm a brilliant mistake." Freed from ornate production, working on all but one cut

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Communards lead singer Jimi Somerville (formerly of Bronski Beat) entertains crowd at The Saint in New York.

without his band, The Attractions, songs emerge about exile and dislocation, about loss, rage and the struggle to articulate these feelings. In this impressionistic landscape, time folds, shatters and language fails. Two G.I. brides from England find themselves stranded, having "cried for so long, that we don't speak any English, just American without tears." Without a pause we're on a tear through J.B. Lenoir's giddy, desperate "Eisenhower Blues," dislocated into crazed poverty in this anachronistic era of prosperity. An ode to a "hangover that had a personality" rips like a Sun-session barnburner, powered by Elvis Presley's own TCB band; then comes the former philanderer's stunning love song, "Jack of All Parades." The album closes with the terrifyingly poignant "Sleep of The Just," which the unforgiving vocal leaves no

doubt will remain out of reach.

One of the record's strongest cuts, "Little Palaces," paints a picture of British council-house poverty and generational child abuse with terse details and a harrowing vocal of almost fully choked desperation. It's a fascinating counterpoint to "Lawless Avenues," the tragic barrio epic on a similar theme that forms the centerpiece of **Jackson Browne's** *Lives in the Balance* (Asylum). Browne's street opera sounds pat and contrived, however laudably intentioned. It's a set piece, a sociology slide show that never captures the chilling panic that suffuses "Little Palaces."

Browne, L.A.'s poet laureate of the "me generation," has immersed himself in the Sanctuary movement of late, and six of the eight cuts on his new LP revolve around Central America. The title cut, a plea against intervention, is eerily reminiscent of Vietnam-era protest songs of 20 years ago. Browne is hopeful, angry, self-mocking and righteously indignant on this disc, but for all his craft, and the high-gloss production, I feel as though I'm being pamphleteered over Perrier at the gym.

**Stan Ridgeway** paints some fairly spooky landscapes on his solo debut, *The Big Heat* (IRS). The former lead singer with Wall of Voodoo stages a miniature film festival with crafty film noir scenarios (atmospheric narratives out of Tom Waits country) that are models of taut, controlled story-telling, matched by elegantly suggestive musical cinematography.

No such luck on **Paul Jabara's** "popetta," — *De La Noche* (Warner Bros.). This over-the-top, time-warp, disco confection sounds like it was composed out of amyl-withdrawal D.T.'s by a queen who spent too much time watching Carmen Miranda on mescaline. Some proceeds go to AmFAR, so I'd love to recommend this. Maybe if you saw God in 1977 at The Saint you'll hear something that escaped these ears, but I promise you, "It's Raining Men" this ain't.

Take note of a curious phenomenon: Two reggae tunes about AIDS are getting dance floor play: "Ah Afraid De Aids" by **Mighty Sparrow** (B's) and "Aids" by **King Kong** (Powerhouse/UK). I haven't heard either, but in New York and London they're hot on the playlists. Is this a trend?

Finally, a cheat on that promise to save spring releases for next time. "Don't Want To Know If You Are Lonely" (Warner Bros.), the first single from **Husker Du's** freshly minted major label debut disc, *Candy Apple Grey*, is a piece of blowtorch pop with enough keening energy to scare the trees into bloom. Consider it my official choice to set the standards for an awesome spring. And Peter, forget about the ruler!