

BETWEEN ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

A Buyer's Guide

"So, what should I buy?" my editor whispers, almost desperately. As an astute critic, I ought to rapidly and reassuringly rattle off a reply. I don't, though — first, because I've learned that homos' tastes in tunes are not homogeneous (one queen's music is another's migraine); next, because in these tough times, the wrong disc might ignite a suicide. Did a blast of "Don't Worry, Be Happy," "One in a Million," or "I Am What I Am" propel Abbie Hoffman to pound down 150 phenobarbitals? Are there vinyl inspiration and invigoration in catastrophic season? Are there discs that promise to please perverts of diverse sexual-musical persuasions? This roster rises to those challenges. Listen first and then lambaste.

1. 2 nice girls, Two Nice Girls (Rough Trade). The finest female-group debut disc I've heard in 1989 showcases an Austin, Tex.-based trio, reinventing and invigorating the revival of folk music. "My Heart Crawls Off" and "Goons," two killer lesbian love songs, shine. Later, the trio rocks out righteous on "Kicks." **The Cowboy Junkies** (whose catatonic lead singer was nominated by one local wag as "the Epstein-Barr Poster Child,") ascended the charts with a cover of "Sweet Jane," sung during an attack of rigor mortis. This trio buries that version with a lesboerotic round, interweaving Joan Armatrading's "Love and Affection" with the Velvet Underground classic.

The tune liable to break Two Nice Girls on college radio is "I Spent My Last \$10 (on Birth Control and Beer)," a country-and-western parody that Gretchen Phillips wrote in the voice of a lesbian lover who has been left for a man. The song is a nervy novelty that promises less than the trio habitually delivers.

Two Nice Girls sound like The Roaches but with a rough-hewn, rapacious intelligence displacing the three sisters' familial claustrophobia. Nice Girl Kathy Korniloff recently railed, "We're heavy metal now; we've finally got a drummer." I'm looking forward to their cover of "We're an American Band." Until then — track down their terrific album.

2. 3 Feet High and Rising, De La Soul (Tommy Boy). The best male-group debut LP I've encountered in 1989 is a black-rap record for dem that despises the genre. Forget all those brute, in-*yer-face* rants; this

is a disc of quiet, extravagant inventions, crafted by a trio of savvy samplers who cut in Liberace, Steely Dan's "Peg," and Prince's "Straight-Shooter" and cut up over their sources, icy and clever.

3. Dolittle, The Pixies (4AD, Elektra). The most invigorating pop product since Madonna's *Like a Prayer* comes from a band of Boston-based "bizarros." The disc was originally titled *Whore*, till the band opted for a tag that suggests both apathy and conversing with animals. Neither notion may easily illuminate the LP's suggestive-yet-opaque lyrics. But with musical motifs borrowed from classic Clash, Velvets, Pretenders, and Sonic Youth — and vocals that range from confidence to a caterwaul — the Pixies rank as the most endearing and unnerving combo climbing the college charts. Don't detour this disc if you've ever discovered revelation on the radio.

4. Ovary Action, Yeastie Girls (Lookout). This agit-pop-rap trio offers exhilarating, a cappella feminist rants. The lack of music or percussion propels them closer to public-service announcements or comedy routines than dance-floor fodder, but "Put a Lid on It" still ranks as the hippest condom-advisory I've heard, and I want to know who has crafted a more persuasive celebration of female masturbation than their rap "Fuck Yourself," which ends with these reckless white girls shouting, "You've got ten fingers. Use 'em, baby!" A bonus on this seven-inch is Cammie's performance of Beethoven on a tampon applicator. A must order. (Send \$2.50 to Lookout Records, P.O. Box 1000, Laytonville, CA 95454.)

5. The Chess Box, Willie Dixon (Chess/MCA). At a recent AIDS benefit in London, Boy George sang a courageously camp version of "Little Red Rooster," introducing it as a song that the Rolling Stones used to do back when. Howlin Wolf did it five years before the Stones, and Willie Dixon wrote the classic. Thirty-six of the songsmith's triumphs are collected here in versions by the original black stars — singles that were later covered by superstars like Led Zeppelin and the Stones. Meet the Brill Building of the blues.

6. The Chess Box, Chuck Berry (MCA). The riff, the wit: the singles. Berry was a black hairdresser-guitarist who impersonated the dreams of white American teenagers and their need to rebel against

normative values. Homos can appreciate the talent and these impulses.

7. The Sweetest Peaches, Etta James (Chess/MCA). The voice that jump-started Janis Joplin and often matches Aretha's, the woman who glowered fearlessly through possibly the raunchiest sets in the history of gut-bucket blues singing (at The Stud in San Francisco in the late '70s), reclaims her legacy with this long-delayed anthology of her classics. Tell Mama!

8. Hillbilly Music Vol. 1, Various (Capitol). Buddy Holly-wannabee Marshall Crenshaw proved an inspired choice to pick through Capitol Records' country-music vaults to assemble these four sides of raw, ribald hick curios and classics.

9. Behind the Blue Neon, George Strait (MCA). Western swing and honky-tonk bathos with a gold American Express card: Hank Williams meets Bing Crosby. A tame frontier?

10. Spike, Elvis Costello (Warner Bros.). The mercurial magpie and stunning songsmith calls this his "comedy album" — Costello's Cervantesque genre hopping, costume songs shot through with pathos and rage. The joke is that Costello chronicles the human comedy as a soulful but incorrigible outsider — while collaborating with legendary sidemen like Paul McCartney, Allen Toussaint, Roger McGuinn, and the Dirty Dozen Brass band. Gay folk ought to catch his drift.

11. Brazil Classics 1, Various (Sire). David Byrne, ayatollah of the Talking Heads, is your tour guide through the post-bossa nova territory of *Tropicalismo*: The Downtowner has gone down-hemisphere and packaged the players (before Paul Simon could go out to claim them as discoveries and collaborators). Jorge Benn rules, but Byrne failed to find Rio's answer to Madonna.

Count this as a spring shopping guide, but do me a little favor, OK? I constantly get asked which records are the best to screw to. I've got my ideas, but I'd love to hear yours. Post them to me care of *The Advocate*. The best effort is guaranteed an award and the chance to help poor souls like yourself invest their money wisely and enhance the promise of romance. Lick a stamp, stud or studette. The date you save may be your own.

— Adam Block