

**IN THIS ISSUE**

**PERILS OF ROCK CRITICISM (VOL. 1)...** I'm beginning to believe that it's impossible to be a competent popular music critic. Consider:

Last week, I received about 40 CDs and tapes in the mail. This may seem a strange thing to complain about but it reflects a disconcerting reality. At an average of 60 minutes a disc, it means I need a full business week to do that pile justice—presuming one listening is just, which it rarely is. Experience tells me that a lot of important music—*The Chronic* and *Ten* are two excellent recent examples—can only be evaluated accurately over weeks and months of listening. If you try to be conscientious about your work, you may even find yourself digging out *Murmur* after a decade to see if it sounds better in light of “Man on the Moon” and the “Everybody Hurts” video. If you find, as I did, that it does, you then have to figure out how to catch up to a band as significant as R.E.M.—while still doing *some* kind of justice to those 40 new records every week.

On the other hand, I can still remember one of the first packages I ever received from Warner/Reprise. (Research suggests it would have been early 1970). It contained *Moondance*, *Sweet Baby James*, and if I remember right, a Randy Newman album, along with a few other forgotten items, less than a dozen albums

**On the Road With Exene and Professor Griff [2]**

**Rebel Rock on the Rise in Mexico [3]**

**Agenda of New Rap-Bashers Revealed [7]**

in all. That was it from the highly prolific Warner labels—for that *month*.

Two decades ago, then it was possible not only to listen to every significant record released but to give it full attention over a fairly relaxed time span. Not only that, there was little or no deadline pressure. Because major newspapers and magazines didn't cover most kinds of pop, you could figure out what a record meant before deciding what to write about it. In today's climate, that's impossible. Most magazines and papers insist on running reviews on the day, or certainly in the week, that an album is released. You can't digest all the information Prince, for instance, will probably throw at you in that time

span. All you can offer is what I call the light-switch judgment: An on/off appraisal of whether the record's surface is appealing, whether it's “consumer-worthy.” Most editors, who find idea-oriented pieces vaguely unjournalistic, prefer it that way. It isn't clear to me what most writers think. Since most never knew any other system, what you mostly get is hackery, though it's always a surprise to find what thoughtful critics (Leonard Pitts, Jr. at the *Miami Herald*, Jon Pareles at the *New York Times*) can do within such limits. The review sections of most music magazines have become sinkholes of product evaluation, about as soulful and reliable as the automotive magazines (and without as much interesting art), though J.D. Considine at *Musician* writes one paragraph reviews with wit and clarity.

But mostly, the combination of musical overproduction and deadline regimentation results in hyper-specialization. Writers who know about

**YEAH, BUT DOES HE KNOW HOW TO PONY LIKE BONY MARONIE?...** The single coolest thing that happened at this year's Grammys occurred late in the evening, as Itzhak Perlman left an elevator to take the stage for the show's classical performance. Though he walks on crutches, Perlman virtually sped along, propelled by the melody he sang. “Nah, nah nah nah-nah, nah nah, nah nahhhh,” he crooned cheerily. On a night that felt more like “Land of 1000 Dunces,” Perlman reminded us what the meeting of a great musician and a great tune can do: **Raise your spirits, crack a smile, make everyone within earshot glad to be alive.**

indie rock or New York hip-hop feel little need to know about "mainstream" bands or West Coast rap—meaning, you get the likes of Pavement and Onyx evaluated by people who don't bother paying close attention to Pearl Jam or Too Short. Often, I feel like I'm reading reviews written in the intellectual equivalent of a none-too-spacious soundproof closet, into which no noise or idea not preapproved has ever been (or will ever be) admitted.

In a music market where everyone from Bulgarian choirs to shy girls in British bedsittingrooms to streetsmart Oakland gangs to beleathered Southern smartasses to New Orleans music snobs has found a substantial audience, focus can only be found by narrowing your vision somehow. But both critic and audience pay a heavy

price, especially when the terms and conditions under which writers work remain secret.

For a musical omnivore like myself, the job is truly impossible. The time I spend trying to figure out dancehall is insufficient, my take on grunge too affected by my age and history, there were probably six or eight fine country voices that got by me while that fascinating but as yet undeciphered *cumbia* anthology was playing, and I've never heard Springsteen's *Unplugged* EP. There are twenty albums of Mexican rock on a shelf waiting for me to make further sense of them (without as much as a school day's Spanish), but all I can tell you for sure is that if royalty advances were determined by raw R&B energy, Tex Tex would have \$25 million and ZZ Top would be just getting by. Con-

fronted by all this, I can only tell you that listening to everything is still the right way to go. You may not get there first with the new Mariah Carey review, but in the end, what you do tell people will add some perspective to what they're hearing and maybe even help keep the historical record straight. That's my version of the job, and I'm sticking to it for as long as I can make it last.—D.M.

**POETRY IN MOTION....** Steven Dopp, a Kansas City fan of X, couldn't have imagined the sequence of events he was setting in motion when he called Henry Rollins' Info Hotline, a number he found in the back of X singer Exene Cervenka's *Virtual Unreality*. Soon Dopp and some friends from work were planning a gig that would feature Exene, writer Don Bajema, and former Public Enemy member Professor Griff.

The February 20 evening of spoken word took place at the Rhumba Box, a struggling all-ages club vital to KC's local scene. Bajema stirred the packed house with his politically explosive poetry. He also pointed out that, in the two short weeks the three writers had trekked across Canada and the northern U.S., they'd found pockets of people "who represent the same thing you do." He then steered people toward "Casanova [editor of *Union of the Homeless National News*] and the people at the tables in the back. They are the best chance we've got!"

Griff then took the stage and invited musicians in the audience to come up and improvise behind rhymes from his three solo albums. He asked everyone in the club to picture their enemies on stage and shout out what they would say to them if they had the chance.

Cervenka closed the show with

**DOUBLE YOUR STANDARD, DOUBLE YOUR—FUN?....** Black comedian Martin Lawrence made some off-color references but used none of the FCC's seven forbidden words in his monologue at the start of *Saturday Night Live* February 19. Within the week, SNL banned Lawrence from the program, then NBC banned him from the network, and all the while he was subjected to national censure by the nation's media pundits.

Bono said "fuck," one of the FCC's forbidden words and theoretically enough to cost CBS and all its affiliates their broadcasting licenses, in his initial remarks at the Grammy Awards. He received a few tsks-tsks from media pundits and no public criticism at all from the network or NARAS, the Grammy-givers.

Just a few months ago, Tupac Shakur and two friends were arrested for allegedly pulling a gun on two off-duty cops in downtown Atlanta. Tupac and his crew were basically convicted of the crime in the media before the emergence of any facts (such as the ones where the white Georgia cops not only instigated the incident but drew first), and this increased the call for the banishment of gangsta rap from the airwaves, where it's generally pretty damn hard to find in the first place.

On March 5, Grace Slick of the Jefferson Starship was arrested for allegedly aiming a shotgun at cops who'd come to her house in Tiburon, California, to respond to a domestic disturbance. The media hasn't bothered to condemn the behavior of Slick and has failed to connect her case to the undoubtedly dozens of other aging-but-armed hippies in the U.S. Nor has anyone made a call to ban Airplane/Starship acid-rock and its middle-of-the-road offshoots from the airwaves, even though classic rock and AOR stations broadcast it endlessly.