

Entertainment

1993 in Review

a look at the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

by Michael Edwards

It started with the Elvis stamp, and ended with the return of Pearl Jam. Sigh. Luckily there were a few highlights in between (such as...I'll get back to you on that). So here goes with a brief, highly subjective view of the past twelve months....

1993 was one of the best years in quite a while for music, and the crop of albums goes to show that. The various bits of the Pixies came up with a couple of albums; Frank Black's wasn't too bad whereas the Breeders "Last Splash" was quite wonderful but very unlike their last one. Throwing Muses splinter group Belly's debut "Star" heralded the return of pop music, and the Pooh Sticks continued to produce their own brand of pop on "Million Seller". The Red House Painters came out with two albums, the first being superior to the second but both being a mite on the downlifting side. Big Star wannabees Teenage Fanclub came back sounding just like Big Star on "Thirteen", while fellow Scots the Pastels came out with their retrospective "Truckload Of Trouble" to remind us of what an untalented bunch they are. Old timer Epic Soundtracks finally released a solo album after an eternity in the business, while Julian Cope just kept doing his own thing...

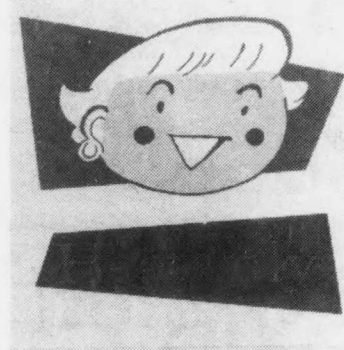


ALBUM OF THE YEAR:

My top five in no particular order though are Stereolab's wonderfully titled "Transient Random-Noise Bursts With Announcements" which is impossible to describe, so just go and buy it. The Lemonheads released an incredible album for the second year running; "Come On Feel" is more polished than its predecessor, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing. Plenty of guest stars and pop songs to keep you occupied. The Mekons have been together for more years than I remember, and been on more records labels than I can remember too. This year they finally got their "I Heart Mekons" released - the perfect synthesis of their brand

of folk punk; not for all tastes. Very English (I hate to say...). Dead Can Dance returned this year with "Into The Labyrinth"; they are a band that are influenced by many musical styles. On this their sixth album, the major influences are Irish and Arabic, and the duo provide some of their most atmospheric and haunting music. Finally, "The Roaring Third" by Prisonshake - simply the best and strongest collection of songs I have heard all year; another splendid release from Scat Records.

So that is my top five, although there are many more that I have missed - I will keep you posted over the next while of some of the others that deserve your attention.

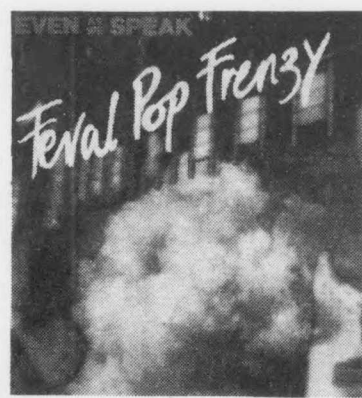


SINGLE OF THE YEAR:

Or in other words, my favourite songs of the year. First up, is "Linger" by the Cranberries - I was slightly disappointed by the album, but this song is just pure joy. Then there is "Atta Girl" by Heavenly - cute group turn angry in girl-leaves-boy tale. "Stupid Thing" by Paul Quinn and the Independent Group is one of the most sophisticated singles to leave Scotland in the past while, and a sign that Postcard Records are back to stay. Stereolab are back to their old tricks by putting out a ridiculously limited single out called "French Disco"; it also happens to be their best song of the year, even if most people won't get to hear it. Sigh. A final pick is from some more Scottish talent the Cocteau Twins with their bizarre version of "Frosty The Snowman" which will ironically be their biggest hit. You need a sense of humour to be in the music business...

DEBUT OF THE YEAR:

My vote for the debut of the year goes to The Harvest Ministers for "Little Dark Mansion" - still a wonderful, mellow album. But this has been a good year for newcomers; Liz Phair's "Exile In Guyville" isn't quite as good as they make out but still an incredible debut. The Cranberries showed much promise on their debut, as did East River Pipe



with their own brand of pop music. And I can't pass Even As We Speak, yet another Sarah band whose "Feral Pop Frenzy" is also my favourite album title of the year. Here's hoping that they can all follow up in 1994.

CANADIAN RELEASE OF THE YEAR:

Without a doubt the new Rush album. Nah, just kidding. This title goes to Sarah MacLachlan for "Fumbling Towards Ecstasy," her third album and maybe her best one so far. A wonderful songwriter, she also turned up on the splendid AIDS benefit "No Alternative" too so hopefully she will get some recognition outside of Canada. Plenty of other music came out of Canada during the year, with some other notables being from The Morganfields, D.O.A., Spirit Of The West and, how could anyone forget, Corky And The Juice Pigs.

RECORD LABEL OF THE YEAR:

Despite one of the strongest years by 4AD for quite a while, this accolade must go to Scat Records simply for providing some of the best music of the year which was previously undiscovered by most people, including myself. For the full story, see next week's column for an in-depth expose.

WELCOME BACK....:

A year of returns by some long gone favourites. Who'd have thought that the Velvet Underground would have reformed with a new song. Only one new song I'll grant you, but they are back. Another band back to play some concerts were Big Star, and the leader Alex Chilton says if the money is right, he would make a new album too - here's hoping. Elvis Costello also came back with his most ambitious album to date with the Brodsky String Quartet. It was an album that bridged the gap between classical and 'pop/rock/contemporary' music in a way that Paul McCartney only dreamed of when

he put out his Liverpool Oratorio. Meatloaf also turned up again in the ever-so-imaginatively titled "Bat Out Of Hell II". The album reunited him with the god-like Jim Steinman for an album that could have come out 16 years ago. And it was awfully good to see the Cocteau Twins come back with "Four Calender Cafe" - no dramatic departures but the usual wonderful ethereal treat. And I swear you can make out most of the lyrics this time.



FOURTEEN MINUTES AND COUNTING:

Or the people whose fame must be close to an end. Or an excuse for me to do some bitching. Firstly Pearl Jam - its about time everyone realised that sounding like Bad Company is NOT cool, or that difficult. Porno For Pyros - he had no talent in Jane's Addiction, and some things just don't change. Stone Temple Pilots, Alice In Chains, Soundgarden, etc. - public decency must prevail. Spin Doctors - I know its quite a good song, but you still have only one song. Either write some more or go away. Suede - at least you gave us a couple of good songs while you were here. Blind Melon - the bee was cute, but now it's annoying. And urinating on the stage in Vancouver wasn't too smart either. Guns 'N' Roses - just wishful thinking I suppose. Billy Idol - Cyberpunk???? Garth Brooks - yeah, stopping the sale of second hand CDs will keep you out of the gutter...



UNCOMMERCIAL ARTIST OF THE YEAR:

Julian Cope without a doubt. After being kicked off Island Records quite unceremoniously last year, he bounced back this year by doing some really weird things. His first release of the year was "Rite", an instrumental meditation album

which included a couple of 25 minute 'songs'. Then he followed up 1989's "Skellington" with the imaginatively titled "Skellington II" which was a sort of topical acoustic experiment with a bit of Kraut rock thrown in for good measure. Both of these releases were available by mail order only making it almost impossible to pick up. And now Mr. Cope is working on a book about stone circles in Scotland and a new album entitled "Autogeddon" - I am holding my breath in anticipation. Julian goes from weird to weirder and we wouldn't have him any other way.

COVER VERSION OF THE YEAR:

A no contest here - "All Along The Watchtower" by Neil Young from October's Bob Dylan 30th anniversary celebration. Cover versions tend to be easy options taken by artists looking for a hit, but here Neil Young turns in an epic performance that even leaves the Hendrix version for dead (no pun intended...). It really would seem that he can do no wrong - he even managed to make Pearl Jam seem almost acceptable at the MTV Awards when they joined him onstage for "Rocking In The Free World". After his rather peculiar exploits during the eighties, his rebirth seems complete. I think I'm almost ready to forgive him for "Trans" now...

IRRITATING TREND OF THE YEAR:

A tie here. Firstly, Unplugged. It is a nice idea, and has given some fine performances (especially The Cure). But now people are queuing up to take part, after all, there is a lot of money to be made once the concert gets its now inevitable album release. The biggest selling CD in Canada this year was Eric Clapton "Unplugged," and several others have also hit the charts too, but do we really need some aging star resurrecting his career by massacring a Van Morrison song? The guilty party knows who he is...

The other thing that bugs me is the box set. Now there is even a Tom Cochrane box set, which is labelled as a limited edition - probably a good thing or else every household could own one. Does anyone really need this? Box sets seem to be worthwhile if they bring together unavailable material, but a couple of new songs and a glossy book? Maybe I'm being a little bit cynical, but it seems as if marketing has gone awry and some people have way too much money.

And thus ends my little jaunt through 1993; not too bad a year musically. In fact, good enough to restore my faith just in time for 1994. Until the next Michael Bolton album anyway...