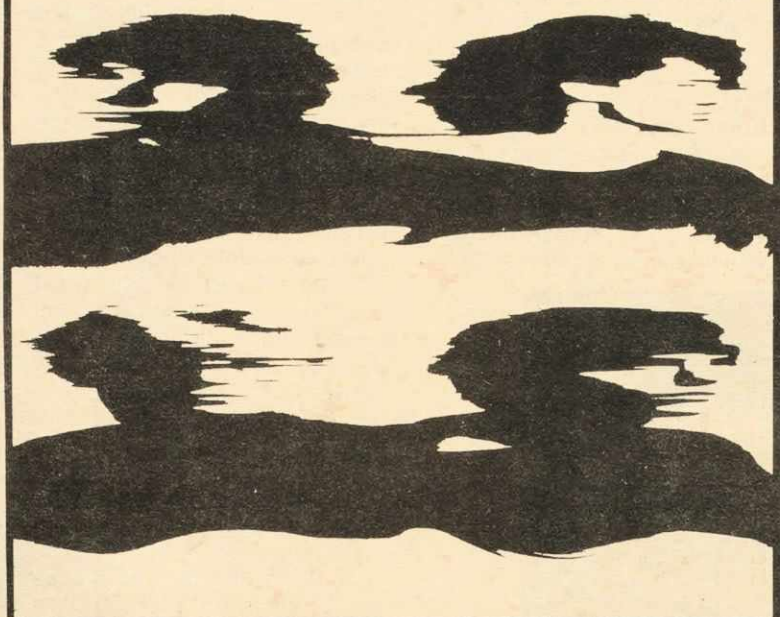


Music in 1981, that was the year that was

U2 · BOY



by Gisele Marie Baxter

1980 was a year of beginnings; an exciting year for popular music. The Clash, The Pretenders, Pete Townshend and Gary Numan were all on the radio, enjoying great success; there was a sense that people wanted to move away from the theatrical excesses and mindless disco beat of mainstream pop music in the mid to late 1970s. Then what happened to the radio in 1981? Did it have anything to do with what political analysts called the shift to conservatism?

1981 saw the great success of "Stars on 45," medleys (chiefly of Beatles songs) which were electronically processed so everything moved to the same synthetic beat. This third-rate nostalgia was joined on the charts by Styx, with its whiny, pretentious **Paradise Theatre**, the depressing **Heavy Metal** soundtrack, and the Rolling Stones, whose album **Tattoo You** and American tour were accorded the razzle-dazzle publicity usually saved for events such as man's first walk on the moon. So what? Their music lacks the passion which made them great once; maybe Mick Jagger has spent too much time in chic New York discos.

There was some good music on the radio — Tom Petty's **Hard Promises** had some lovely tracks, especially "The Insider," Gary U.S. Bonds' **Dedication** was the passionate testimony of a still-intense rock'n'roll survivor, and the Police's **Ghost in the Machine** was jazzy, bright, infectious and often politically perceptive. The Who's **Face Dances** proved that this long-lasting British band can confront and celebrate its maturity with eloquence, as it did its youth. **Pretenders II** was a smashing indication of that band's talents; Chrissie Hynde brings such convincing emotion to everything she sings with her strong, sweet dusky voice that she remains pop's best female vocalist.

The very best music of 1981 was as good or better than that of 1980, but was not heard so

often on the radio, thanks to some decidedly unadventurous programming. This music continued to discover, in theme and music, and provided symbols for the troubled times in which we find ourselves. If it didn't hold out answers, it could offer insights and sometimes hope. The following is a subjective selection of 1981's finest, of music which represented that year, yet has the power to last much longer.

BEST BAND/ARTIST: U2

October, and the trees are stripped bare
Of all their wares—do I care?
October, and kingdoms rise
And kingdoms fall, but you go on.

"October"

There can be few bands today as magical, as honest, as utterly refreshing and passionate as this young quartet from Dublin, Ireland. They bring an electrifying freshness to rock'n'roll, owing nothing to British or American trends, yet even if they sing from the streets of Dublin, there are mist-shrouded hills and centuries of Celtic tradition behind their music. Within the unified, atmospheric production provided by Steve Lillywhite, they create vibrant, immediate complexities of rhythm and harmony; Bono's vocals are clear, impressive and unique.

This is dance music from the heart and soul, a declaration of faith in a violent age. Both **Boy** and **October** convey a sense of wonder, myth and exuberance; a recognition of spiritual and concrete truths. I love this band for perceiving the sadness and terror, yet daring to find reasons for rejoicing. The members of U2 are Larry (drums), Adam Clayton (bass), The Edge (guitars/piano) and Bono (vocals). They are developing a lovely, exciting music which belongs to their country, yet sings eloquently and powerfully to the world.

Best songs: "I Will Follow," "Shadows and Tall Trees" (**Boy**); "Gloria," "Tomorrow" (**October**).

THE THREE RUNNERS—UP:

The Jam

This three-man English band is still quite reminiscent of the best 1960s-style British pop, but it is also gaining a maturity and individuality which is hard to beat. **Sound Affects** brings out the best in Paul Weller as a songwriter; his romantic anger can grasp clearly, and in lucid urban imagery, the life of the working class in British society, the threat of militarism, and the urgent need for communication. Of course "Start!" sounds like the Beatles, but it also has a sharp edge which could only belong to this decade. The Jam produces songs with anger, humor, irony and the bite of sarcasm, but there is also real compassion and humanity.

Best songs: "Start!", "That's Entertainment."

The Clash

Possibly the first band to release a triple album only a year after a double set, this intensely political quartet opened 1981 with **Sandinista!** Their integrity intact, the Clash refused to produce "London Calling Revisited," providing instead this bewildering thirty-six song collection of jazz, reggae, rhythm-and-blues, ballads and straight-forward rock'n'roll. The result is too long, inconsistent, maybe too indulgent, but undeniably important. At least these Londoners continue to work on their music, and demonstrate a willingness to confront in their music the social issues of today. They're taking chances — letting reggae/dub artist Mikey Dread, fiddler Tymon Dogg and keyboardist Mickey Gallagher's kids sing lead on a number of songs, and experimenting with music we just don't expect from this band. But merely knowing that Joe Strummer, Mick Jones, Paul Simonon and Topper Headon are still alive and well and developing new music together is cause for optimism.

Best songs: "Police on My Back," "Hitsville U.K.," "Something About England," "Rebel Waltz."

Japan

The best thing about Japan is its ability to mature and innovate so much with each album. Taking the rhythmic influences of diverse musical sources, they create complex arrangements of synthesizer, guitar, percussion and bass, with David Sylvian's compelling vocal an integral part of the music. Their two albums of 1981, **Gentlemen Take Polaroids** and the recent **Tin Drum**, provide a montage of international images, and music which is exotic, romantic yet intelligent, and often hypnotic. Also, they've defied their critics' worst fears — that Japan was no more than a band of well-dressed trendies — and come up with an image which is visually striking but not overwhelming. Japan produces international

music. Despite guitarist Rob Dean's having left the band, there should be success ahead for these working class lads from Lewisham.

Best songs: "Nightporter" (**Gentlemen Take Polaroids**); "Sons of Pioneers" (**Tin Drum**).

HONOURABLE MENTION:

BEST ALBUM: Elvis Costello, **Trust**; Echo and the Bunnymen, **Heaven Up Here**; John Foxx, **The Garden**; Garland Jeffreys, **Escape Artist**; Martha and the Muffins, **This is the Ice Age**; Gary Numan, **Dance**; Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, **Organisation**; The Police, **Ghost in the Machine**; **Pretenders II**; The Undertones, **Positive Touch**.

BEST SONG: Joan Armatrading, "Walk Under Ladders"; Gary U.S. Bonds, "Daddy's Come Home"; Elvis Costello, "Clubland"; Martha and the Muffins, "Swimming"/"Women Around the World at Work"; Gary Numan, "Cry, the Clock Said"; The Police, "Invisible Sun"; The Pretenders, "I Go to Sleep"; The Who, "You Better You Bet"/"Don't Let Go the Coat".

BEST ARTIST/BAND: Those in above categories, also Bruce Cockburn, The Cure, Ellen Foley, Killing Joke, The Kinks, Stiff Little Fingers, The Who.

SPECIAL MENTION (for music only made available here last year, live and greatest hits albums): Joy Division, **Closer and Still**; Gary Numan, **Living Ornaments 1979/1980**; **John Foxx**; **The Secret Policemen's Ball** (a 1979 Amnesty International benefit), especially Pete Townshend's songs; **Magazine, Play**.

So, that was the year that was 1981: the year of New Romanticism, of rockabilly revivals, of Gary Numan's retirement from touring. It was the year we lost Bob Marley, who for many people was Jamaican reggae, and Harry Chapin. It was a confusing, devastating, discouraging year on the world political scene, and the best bands are dealing with that, reflecting and searching for new perspectives. Beneath the often bland commercialism of the mass-market lot, there is a strong current of exciting, insightful music. Sometimes you can dance to it. Sometimes, it's just enough to know it's there and refuses to go away.

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