

MUSIC WEEK

By D.B. Atkins

► TREADING WATER VS. SWIMMING

The songwriting explosion of Stevie Wonder's late adolescence and early adulthood gave us our finest modern pop standards, and his ability to move us deeply with the mere touch of his voice has never wavered—witness his astonishing chorus with Springsteen on *We Are the World*. But Wonder is also the saddest case of arrested development in contemporary American music. Since his wildly ambitious concept album, *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants*, was trashed by the critics and ignored by the public in 1979, Wonder has been in a creative limbo.

The fact that he was more than three years late in releasing his new album, *In Square Circle*, meant one of two things: either he was working on something monstrously different, or he was plain stuck. Regrettably, the latter proves to be the case. The lyrics are banal and treacly, the melodies pleasantly hummable but hardly memorable, and the production mechanical. Wonder sings and plays everything oddly close to the vest: he sounds like an artist treading water, and tiring.

Joni Mitchell, on the other hand, dared to go off the deep end on *Dog Eat Dog*, her first album in three years. Co-producer Thomas Dolby has bathed her in a wash of synthesizer textures, electronic effects and quirky, stop-and-go drum machine rhythms. So though you'd expect her to drown—she has a fragile voice, a fussy intelligence and a rather precious artistic persona—Mitchell more than meets the challenge. While there's absolutely nothing to hum here (she gave up writing gorgeous melodies years ago), there is everything to remember: sensual sweeps of



Joni Mitchell dares to go off the deep end—and makes it.

sound, prickly lyrics, pleasingly puzzling arrangements, humor and sarcasm and sadness.

Dog Eat Dog, as the title suggests, is mostly about the social Darwinism of the Reagan years. She shoots verbal arrows, some not too subtle, at materialism in *Shiny Toys* (in which the phrase "I love my Porsche" is an ironic refrain); at cultural imperialism in the plaintive *Ethiopia*; and at right-wing, militaristic evangelists in *Tax Free* (in which she hired Rod Steiger to sermonize about a godly invasion of Cuba). The emotional and aural feel of the record is at once lush and stark—Joni Mitchell has created an album you can almost see.

► VIDEO BLUES

Music video is in a state of crisis according to Kevin Godley, who has directed the Police, Herbie Hancock and Frankie Goes to Hollywood, among others. In a frightfully serious speech at this year's MTV awards, Godley warned viewers of encroaching mediocrity—a certain crassness and commercialism, not to mention a lack of creativity. After strapping myself to my sofa and watching six straight hours of MTV, I fear Godley is right. Here's why:

1) *Not enough blonds to go around.* The industry is running

out of blonds. How many fair-haired, unemployed actress-models can there be with cheekbones as high as an elephant's eye and legs up to their ribs? The same blonds are beginning to appear on different videos. And above



Aimee Mann: MTV's tall totem.

them all, with icy eyes and a jawline sharp enough to grind a lead guitarist into fine powder, stands the new blond totem of MTV, Aimee Mann of the group 'til Tuesday. Marilyn Monroe would not have made it in music video because her thighs were too ripe. Depressing.

2) *Not enough exotic locations.* In the wake of Duran Duran's globe-trotting, all other artists have had to scramble for what's left of the world. Not much, it turns out. One group, the heavy-metal band Heaven, went to the trouble of helicoptering onto a thin butte in Utah's Canyonlands National Park to shoot *Knockin' on Heaven's Door*. The boys lip-sync up there on the sort of rock spire you're used to seeing in television commercials for light pickup trucks. How exotic is that?

3) *Not enough sincerity.* This must explain the current vogue for black-and-white videos. Bob Dylan, John Cougar Mellencamp, Sting and others are all going retro. Black-and-white demonstrates that you are a serious artiste, that you mean what you say, and that this is a sincere act of communication between said artiste and the viewer, not just some advertisement for a record.

4) *Not enough original ideas.* An increasing number of videos now have for their subject matter, ta-da: other videos. What Steve Perry started—lampooning overblown productions with his video-within-a-video of *Oh Sherrie*—Phil Collins has given the final boot with *Don't Lose My Number*. He sends up the whole process of deciding what kind of a generic "concept" video to make while "quoting" famous videos of years past, tongue firmly in cheek. After Collins' giddy drunk of a video satire, Dire Straits' *Money for Nothing*—about MTV itself—is like a hangover. Two aspirin will not suffice. ♦

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