

MUSIC WEEK

By D.B. Atkins

► CORN IN THE U.S.A.

Last weekend's scheduled Farm Aid jamboree brought to a boil what movies like *Country, Places in the Heart* and *The River* all set simmering: concern for the Amer-

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John Cougar Mellencamp: folk poetry with the jolt of rock.

ican farmer and, more generally, renewed interest in small-town life. Every movement needs an anthem, and John Cougar Mellencamp offers a slew of them on his new **Scarecrow** album. Everything about it is black and white, from the cover (Cougar in denim behind a barbed-wire fence) to the lyrics (printed starkly on the back in the manner of '60s folk records) to the grainy video version of the first single, *Lonely Ol' Night*. This is a serious record. Even the fun stuff is serious fun. Just the sort of thing that a straight-ahead rocker like Cougar should not try, right?

Wrong. The record *works*. Cougar's rural Americana is centered in solid images and first-person narratives of discovery, and driven home with biting, live-in-the-studio rock. As a result, the songs don't come off as lectures from a pulpit but rath-

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ble phrases like "You've got to stand for somethin' or you're gonna fall for anything." Michael McDonald, on the other hand, presents us with a whole different kind of corn on his latest LP, **No Lookin' Back**. We're

talking trite, dated and mawkishly sentimental. The ex-Doobie Brother, who some consider the potential Sinatra of his generation, keeps trying to live up to his 1979 smash, *What a Fool Believes*, and here he doesn't even come close. The songs are slick, bland and full of lyrics that sound like an Everyday Guide to Clichés in the English Language. On the lead single, *No Lookin' Back*, McDonald tells us, "Rivers will run, bridges will burn," and on two different songs on that same side of the album, he invokes the hardly startling advice: "Live and learn."

Lord knows, McDonald is a well-meaning and nice guy. His salt-and-pepper beard is nice. His production values are nice. His romantic notions are nice. His bank account is very nice. This entire record springs from a reservoir of niceness. On *Any Foolish Thing*, McDonald sings with his muscular voice, "I know you don't believe every line you hear/ Forgive me if I'm sounding too sincere." Now, we can forgive a pop star for a lot of things, like having such big pipes and such a small imagination, but for being too sincere? Never.



Sheila E: a British accent but not afraid of sax.

► FOUR SINGLES TO LIVE BY

Sheila E. *Sister Fate*. A strange, frenetic fusion intro gives way to a fast groove, nasty double-entendre lyrics, a Coltrane-meets-King-Curtis saxophone break, a recapitulation in a mock-British accent, swooshing bass and organ, machine-gun timbals and jumping chorus. The result is a totally out-to-lunch triumph.

Dire Straits *Money for Nothing*. There is only one thing more amusing about this hit song disparaging MTV than MTV constantly showing it: it is that the people who love the song and hate MTV love watching it on MTV.

Cock Robin *When Your Heart Is Weak*. This is a stirring ballad from the splendid debut album of a promising West Coast band. Its leader, Peter Kingsbery, has an amazingly rich voice—flexible, powerful, passionate—and he has created the first genuine goose-bump single since Cyndi Lauper's *Time After Time*.

Charlie Singleton *Make Your Move on Me, Baby*. The title gives away the general direction, but the ex-Cameo guitarist has produced the lightest, tightest, hippest funk of the fall. It's sexy because it sounds sexy, not because it's about sex. ♦

THE WORD FROM BILLY & JONI

► Message songs, and not only those fighting famine, are making a big comeback. **Billy Joel's** new single, *You're Only Human (Second Wind)*, is a survival manual for teenagers tempted to take their lives. With suicide now the second leading cause of death among teens (after car accidents), the song couldn't be better timed. Joel, who himself came close to ending it all as a teen, is donating his royalties to the National Committee for Youth Suicide Prevention. . . . ► The genre of the **music video** has finally been granted cultural certification. An exhibition including more than 30 videos, from the **Beatles' Penny Lane** to the **Talking Heads' Road to Nowhere**, is currently running in Manhattan's hallowed Museum of Modern Art. . . . ► Having split from **Van Halen**, **David Lee Roth** will make the leap to movies next year, starring in his own feature, *Crazy from the Heat*. . . .

► Coming soon to a sensitive person's home near you, the new **Joni Mitchell** album, produced by, of all people, **Thomas Dolby**. The advance word is very good.