

Album Charts

College Music Journal

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Stone Roses
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WXYC

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Joel frustrates with clashing styles

Billy Joel

Storm Front

Columbia
●● 1/2

After listening to Billy Joel's new album release, *Storm Front*, many people will wonder: "What happened to the 'Innocent Man'?" — or better yet — "What happened to the Piano Man?"

Storm Front is a 10-song collection that indicates Joel is in some kind of void — obviously stuck between the toils of being a family man and a musician. His previous studio album release (before the USSR stuff), *The Bridge* was supposed to be the lifestyle-crosser, but obviously Joel's effort didn't succeed because he's still lost and struggling.

Like *The Bridge*, this album emphasizes guitar work, but unlike the smooth strokes exemplified in songs such as "This Is The Time," there's a roughness that gives an image of the Joel on the *Glass Houses* cover getting ready to heave a rock into a glass building. Only now he's destroying the craftwork that made him famous; there are no soft melodies, no classic Joel vocal harmonies and definitely no piano man.

Although music critics probably should not expect the piano man on every album, they should expect good music. *Front* is frustrating; just when

TIM LITTLE albums

the music seems like it's going to form something great, it comes off as only so-so. There lies the main problem: *Front* is a disappointingly decent album by a great musician.

Part of the problem is that Joel

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switched from the usual co-production care of Phil Ramone to Mick Jones, guitarist of Foreigner. Jones also plays and sings vocals, all of which results in a clash of styles. The lead track, "That's Not Her Style," is assuredly not Joel's style and is a perfect example of Jones' over-production. "When In Rome" is another

example of harsh music; it sounds like it could have joined "Modern Woman" on the *Ruthless People* soundtrack.

Joel also gets the "help" of Richard Marx's vocals on the album. Listeners have to ask why. Surprisingly, the student influences the master's work. The title track and a few other songs sound as if Joel had been listening to *Repeat Offender* for three days straight.

But something good can almost always be found in the worst of situations and luckily the same applies to *Front*. "Shameless" is a bluesy masterpiece in which Joel's harpsichord performance is the main highlight. Although it probably could have been sung better by Don Henley, Joel does a wonderful job using his Ray Charles-influenced vocals to bring out feeling in the music: "You know it should be so easy for a man who's strong/ To say he's sorry or admit when he's wrong/ I've never lost anything I ever missed/ But I've never been in love like this."

"I Go To Extremes" is also closer to vintage Joel, with the piano finally standing out in the music. The album's up-tempo tunes are delights that give relief from the dreary mood set in songs like "Leningrad" and "State Of Grace." These few good points only tease the listener and create hopes for more to come.

Even the album's first single release, "We Didn't Start The Fire," which Joel lists figures and events of the last 40 years from Eisenhower and James Dean to homeless vets and



AIDS, has a "Pressure"-like sound that is only a weak facsimile of his previous works.

The best song, "And So It Goes," soars with Joel's vocals and keyboard work as the only sounds on the track. The song comes in a plain, brown wrapper which simply outclasses the rest of the dead, overdone weight on the album. Unfortunately for Joel, one great song can't make this decent album good.

Joel would have definitely fared better with more "New York State Of Mind" style and less Christie Brinkley glamour. *Storm Front* leaves the listener wishing Joel had followed the basic writing rule of William Zinsser: "Simplicity is always in good taste."

Compilation twists jangly pop

Textones

Through the Canyon

Rhino
●●●●

The Textones' *Through the Canyon* is yet another superb compilation by Rhino Records. This album documents the years 1980-86, marking different stages of the Textones' development through alternate takes and previously unreleased tunes.

Singer-songwriter-guitarist Carla Olson was the main creative force in the now-defunct Textones. She started the band with guitarist Kathy Valentine in Los Angeles in 1978. After seven years of playing clubs with an ever-changing lineup, Valentine joined the Go-Go's. Olson released only two Textones albums, the critically acclaimed *Midnight Mission* and *Cedar Creek*. In 1986, Olson officially went solo.

The songs on *Through the Canyon*, marking different stages in the band's development, are mostly jangly pop. Olson has great taste in cover material, with catchy renditions of the Searchers' "Silver," the Motors' "Dancing the Night Away," and Bobby Darin's "Keep A Walkin'."

Olson's own songs are intelligent and tuneful. The title cut finds a striking love metaphor. The driving "What Do You Want With Me?" finds Olson complaining "It's deja vu again/ This is getting old." "Number One is to Survive" first appeared on *Midnight Mission*, but this alternate version features George Callins on slide guitar instead of Ry Cooder.

Kathy Valentine handles the vocals on her own "Can't Stop the World," a song later covered by the Go-Go's, though never before on a Textones album. Phil Seymour (an ex-member of the Dwight Twilley Band) sings lead on two cuts, the straight rocker "Just a Matter of Time" and the slower "Stay With Me."

Every tune sounds familiar, firmly rooted in the basic college radio sound. But Carla Olson always manages to find some new lyrical or musical twist, avoiding the too-frequent clichés in much of college radio music. With the aid of the liner notes (since the songs are not arranged chronologically), the dramatic stylistic progress of the band becomes apparent.

From the Plimsouls-rock of "Reason to Leave," to the country twang of "Drifter," to the early Blondie-ish "Through the Canyon," Olson constantly calls up, re-invents, and spits out a variety of rock approaches. The only common links between the cuts are Carla Olson's voice and 12-string guitar.

Through the Canyon is solid, a rare accomplishment for a compilation. This retrospective captures the essence of the Textones — melodic, Byrdsy rock in a variety of styles. Perhaps now the mass audience long denied access to them will finally catch up.

— Brian Springer

INXS singer fades into triteness

Max Q

Max Q
Atlantic
●

After the 16-month *Kick* world tour, INXS lead singer Michael Hutchence decided that a side project was in order. So he gathered up several of Australia's most talented musicians and formed the band Max Q. The name refers to the fictional character, a composite of the band's members, depicted on the album cover. The resulting album is certainly destined for cut-out bins everywhere.

The project looks promising on paper. Hutchence, as the teenage heart throb of INXS, has been guaranteed platinum lately. Ollie Olsen, Hutchence's friend, is a songwriter and producer of such Aussie acts as Hugo Kiang and Whirlywird. Augmenting this nucleus is an assortment of diverse members, including violinist Phillip Hartl, John Murphy on the Tibetan thigh bone trumpet and guitarists Arnie Hanna and Michael Sheridan.

Hutchence and Olsen fail because they allow trite synthesizer patterns to dominate almost every song. The album is competent, but

like all calculated bands (such as Bad English), *Max Q* is ultimately dull. Almost everything is a retread.

Some songs do manage to shine through, though. Perhaps the album's best groove is the short instrumental "Zero-2-0." The song has a frantic drum beat and jagged guitar. "Tight" is the most solid cut, with clever background vocals, biting guitar and an exciting beat. It is the one track that can sustain excitement. "Ghost of the Year" makes good use of the interplay of acoustic guitar and synthesizers.

Lyrics are Olsen's (the chief songwriter) strength. On "Way of the World," the first single, Hutchence sings "Whether it's God or the bomb/ It's only fear under another name." Most of the album's lyrics are similarly intriguing. The music and arrangements, however, are another story.

Max Q has several cuts that probably sound fine on a dance floor but are easily forgotten. The album lacks the spark of INXS records and most of Ollie Olsen's projects. Songs such as "Everything," "Ot-Ven-Rot" and "Monday Night by Satellite" are generic. The only truly interesting part of this cassette came when my tape deck tried to eat it. Saving it was not really worth the effort.

— Brian Springer

What the Ratings Mean

- — lame
- — just O.K.
- — workable
- — quite good
- — excellent