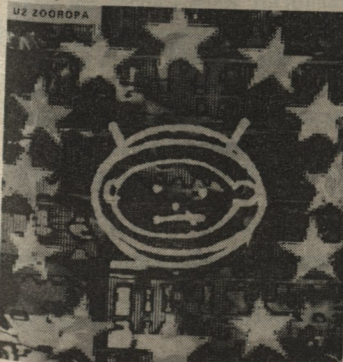


On *Black Sunday* (2) Cypress Hill tell us that they like to get high (hinted at in "I Wanna Get High"). Some people say smoking pot makes them really creative. I doubt it. Repetitious, monotonous and redundant. Fishbone's *Give A Monkey A Brain And He'll Swear He's The Centre Of The Universe* (2) displays glimmers of genuine talent, especially on the ska inflected stuff, like "Unyielding Conditioning." Overall, however, the album is numbing, irritatingly strange and politically obvious. Billy Joel's *River of Dreams* (2) is bad taste itself. The *Peace Together* compilation (2), a benefit for the youth of Ireland, is a collection of truly clueless renditions of songs like "Oliver's Army," "Games Without Frontiers" and "Invisible Sun" by the likes of Pop Will Eat Itself, Curve and Carter blah-blah-blah. Bludgeoning, mechanical and talentless, the album only accentuates how miserable the UK music scene is. U2's version of Lou Reed's "Satellite of Love," a duet with a recording of Natalie Cole, is clumsily executed but Bono's falsetto delivery is gorgeous. The Waterboys' *Dream Harder* (1.5) is remarkably bland. Moxy Fruvous's *Bargainville* (1) is a waste of bullets.

modern world

An increasingly common theme in modern rock is the concept of the media's bombardment of sex, violence and propaganda, as brought up by U2's Zoo TV tour. From



Zooropa (4), U2's "Numb" sounds like an anthem for a generation. The album itself is fairly up-beat, quirky and tuneful, somewhat reminiscent of *Remain in Light* T.H.eds. The band's new, lighter tone isn't so pompous as in the past and their melodic instincts remain perfect. The lone dud is the Johnny Cash sung "The Wanderer," which ends the album on a positively surreal

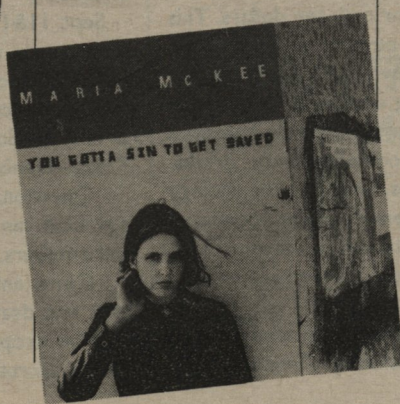
note.

Of all people, Billy Idol jumped on board the Zoo train with *Cyberpunk* (2.5), a vie for artistic integrity in which he steals ideas from ten-year-old sci-fi paperbacks. It's the kind of dumb rock star stuff critics just love to bully. Me, I find *Cyberpunk*'s high-tech decor not hateable; he does a decent job spiffing up what otherwise would be just another batch of crappy Billy Idol songs. Easily his best album ever -- and if that impresses you, you've wandered into the wrong music section.

Almost as unexpectedly, Pete Townshend tackled the computer age with the ludicrous *Psychoderelict* (2.5), not merely an album, heavens no, a dramatic work! Townshend's rock-drama pretensions are strictly middle-brow, at best, and *Psychoderelict* is depressing navel-gazing (and it's a navel we've seen many times). The non-stop chatter reduces the actual songs to sound-bites, but a couple of them do stand out, capturing that epic Who sound: "English Boy" and "Let's Get Pretentious" (Pete's theme song, methinks). The Zoo influence is strictly decorative, not extending past the booklet design and the industrial guitar riff and herky-jerk rhythms of "English Boy." Townshend remains one of the few of his class who seems capable of creating new and exciting music, but his conceptual affliction is beginning to look terminal.

Van Morrison is God

During the summer I also came to the conclusion that Van Morrison is God -- or at least a genre. Ya got jazz, ya got classical, ya got r&b, and ya got Van Morrison, more powerful than any of 'em. But it wasn't Van's boring new album that brought on this revelation, rather it was *You Gotta Sin to Get*



Saved (4), the second solo album from former Lone Justice belter, Maria McKee. Try as it might, *Sin* is a little contrived and derivative, truer to the sound of Morrison than his spirit, but McKee is a solid songwriter whose surging compositions recall the powerful yearning of Morrison's best work, and she's probably the best singer on the planet. McKee even tackles two of Morrison's songs: quite bravely, "The Way Young Lovers Do" from *Astral Weeks* (my goodness!) and Them's "Sad Lonely Eyes." The former trades in the mystery and searching of the original for a standard arrangement but still gets across on the window-rattling force of McKee's vocal; the latter, however, is a soulful improvement on Them's primitive original. *Sin*'s main flaw is its backward-gazing, but when the worst thing you can say about an album is that it's not *St. Dominic's Preview*, you must be doing something very right.

The man himself's *Too Long in Exile* (2.5) is a minor *Hymns to the Silence*, another tour de force of Van's current styles of lite jazz, r&b, country and some minorly searching stuff that reminds us of where he came from. A little livelier than usual, Van still seems determined to keep his music firmly planted in the background, where he's been for over a decade. For those who still believe, *Too Long in Exile* is absolute proof that Van is gone and he ain't never coming back.

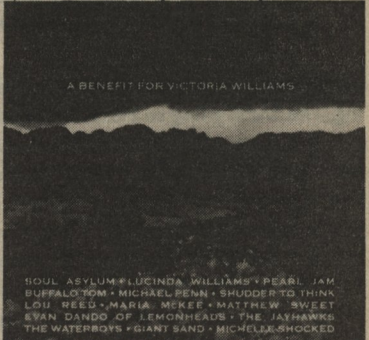
random takes

Anthrax's *The Sound of White Noise* (3) is their most melodic and focused work ever. Tempos are reduced, tunes offset the aggression and new guy John Bush can only be described as a soul singer. Still, the compositions often sound more like an impressively arranged series of segues than actual songs.

Robert Plant is always dependable for a solid, but never spectacular, outing. His latest, *Fate Of Nations* (3), is his most Zeppelin-esque yet. The Zep-ish stuff is what really works ("Calling To You," "Promised Land"); the rest is confident, lushly produced and evocative (especially "29 Palms," one of the best songs of his solo career), but somehow unaffectionate. Without the muscle of Jimmy Page,

Robert Plant's music, as adventurous and forward looking as it is, is forgettable.

Sweet Relief (4.5) is a benefit album for Victoria Williams, a virtually unknown singer/songwriter who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1992. Her songs are extraordinarily resonant, Dylanesque, and the interpretations here are vastly diverse but united in their ragged earthiness and sometimes haunting, sometimes inspiring tones. The best tracks include Pearl Jam's surprisingly restrained (and all the more powerful for it) rendition of "Crazy Mary," Maria McKee's "Opelousas (Sweet Re-



lief)," Matthew Sweet's "This Moment," which makes the best of Sweet's vocal limitations with its modest melody, and Soul Asylum's rousing "Summer of Drugs." The only misfire is Michelle Shocked's predictably awkward gospel reading of "Holy Spirit." Understated, poetic and both mournful and joyous, the unheralded *Sweet Relief* was the summer's best album.

Janet Jackson discovered the wild thing this summer and traded in "Someday is Tonight" (or whatever the hell that was) for "I want you to make me wet." Jackson's take on sex is less self-exploitive than Madonna, less creepy than most soul man agonizing and less psychotic than PJ Harvey or Liz Phair. *janet. [sic]* (3.5) is one of pop's few realistic albums about sex (along with *Let's Get It On*). Never before has such an assertive view of sex come from a woman -- and gone to number one. Anyway, this horny li'l platter is also punchy -- the woman is a hit-making machine. But keeping the album from pop Valhalla is a gooey mass of balladry occupying about the last third of the disc. Still, with about half as much talent as her brother, Janet Jackson, a genuine pop artist, puts out music that's about twice as good.