

Is rock burning out?



ON DISC

Lynden Barber

A LOT of American music reflects media over-stimulation. A constant bombardment of imagery, information and commercial imperatives is causing extreme neurosis.

MTV recently featured an American fashion designer burbling happily about "burnouts" — kids burnt out by a life of tele-culture, with no ideals and interests except themselves and rock'n'roll. MTV — itself a major cause of "burn-out" — thought this rather droll.

The light entertainment of the *River's Edge* generation is full of death imagery — witness American speed-metal, whose bands have names like Slayer and Megadeth, and hard-core punk outfits like *Suicidal Tendencies*. The latter's best-selling hard-core LP (*Suicidal Tendencies*, *Virgin*) is the sound of youths trying to out-scream the white noise of TV madness. It's not my bucket of tea, but I admire a sense of determination this extreme.

British attempts at borrowing from US music tend to be more wry. The thing I like about *The Woodentops'* new LP, *Wooden Foot Cops On The Highway* (*Rough Trade*), is the way it refuses to be tied down to simple interpretations. The fast songs work best — noisy rock collages that raid 20 years of pop history for added colour (a wah wah guitar here, a rockist slide guitar or hip-hop drum machine there), but the slower songs display writer Rolo McGinty's unfortunate tendency to rely on English whimsicality when he's stuck for a strong tune.

Helping out are people like



The mouth that roared ...
Joni Mitchell.

Doug Wimbish (Sugarhill Gang, Adrian Sherwood), Bernie Worrell (George Clinton, Talking Heads) and Fred Maher (Material) — names always guaranteed to make a record worth a spin. In other parts of the industry, the latest hare-brained corporate marketing strategy is the superfluous guest list aimed at perking up the profile of an album.

Take *Joni Mitchell's* new LP,

Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm (Geffen), which features Peter Gabriel, Don Henley, Tom Petty, Billy Idol (God forbid) and Wayne Shorter. With the exception of the latter, none is needed; the lesser-known supporting cast is perfectly in tune with Mitchell's muse, playing with a languid warmth. Those who call this "West Coast yuppie music" aren't listening: Mitchell's open-chord songs are filled with an aching sense of loss, though her inspiration fades towards the end.

When I saw the name *Omar And The Howlers* (*Hard Times In The Land Of Plenty*, CBS) I reached for my gun. Could this be another of those reactionary, thoroughly reprehensible American "roots" bands like *Jason And The Scorchers*, who always provide unhealthy encouragement to pot-bellied old rockers? Ten bars into the astonishing title track I called an ambulance.

This is a Texan bar band in the tradition of the *Fabulous Thunderbirds*, *The LeRoi Brothers* and *Duke Robillard And The Pleasure Kings* — and, on record at least, they're more wild and woolly than any one of them. Leader *Omar Dykes* has an extraordinary voice that's half-way between *Howlin' Wolf* (hence *The Howlers?*) and *John Fogarty* gargling sand, while his guitar swings like a psychopath's axe. Bands like this usually sound a mite tepid and under-par on record, but these curled-lip nasties storm through southern saloon-bar music — blues, soul and R'n'B — as if their pants are on fire.

Some readers apparently had trouble getting hold of *John Zorn's Spillane*, which I raved over recently, but stocks have now been flown in by WEA. *Unlimited!* by *Roger* (aka *Roger Troutman*), which I reviewed as an import, has now been given a local release.