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RECORDINGS



POP / Chris Dafoe
Bedtime Stories Madonna
 (Maverick/Sire CDW 45767)

LIGHTNING FLASHES FROM MADONNA

MADONNA should be the last to gripe about getting chewed up by hype; but it's clear now that the backlash over her book, *Sex*, obscured the merits of her album *Erotica*, which in retrospect includes some of her best work. Of course, Madonna being Madonna, she does take one song out to gripe about the hype, trashing the critics of her erotic forays with the quietly (although not subtly) virtuosic *Human Nature*. The rest of *Bedtime Stories*, by comparison, lives up to the title, with Madonna musing about love over late-night slow jams crafted by producers such as Babyface, Nellee Hooper and Dallas Austin. It's a clever move both commercially (these guys know their way around the top of the charts) and artistically (hands up all those who wanted to hear more about Madonna's sex life) and, combined with her instinctive pop sense, it results in another strong album. *Bedtime Stories* isn't as eclectic or as daring as *Erotica*, but it holds together better as an album, with Madonna throwing twists into the R&B crossover formula — a rap by Me'Shell NdegeOcello on one song, curious lyrics by Icelandic eccentric Bjork on another — that flash like lightning in the quiet storm.

Turbulent Indigo Joni Mitchell (Reprise 9 45786-2)

After releasing a string of dodgy albums through the 1980s, Mitchell returned to form (and, significantly, to her acoustic guitar from her foray into synthesizers) with 1991's *Night Ride Home*. *Turbulent Indigo* is even more sparsely orchestrated, with Mitchell backing her jazzy playing with subtle synthesizer washes and evocative accents from soprano saxophonist Wayne Shorter. The simpler musical approach is welcome, but the album's greatest strength lies in the Mitchell's songwriting. While she's always been able to capture the intimate details of private lives, she has often stumbled when she's tried to be topical. Not here. Songs such as *Sex Kills*, *The Magdalene Laundries* and *Not To Blame* make their cases through the gradual accumulation of details from private and public life and steer clear of the preachiness that marred some of her work in 1980s. Mitchell may not be shy when she's shouting about her own talents — she paints herself as Van Gogh on the cover of the album and echoes the comparison on the title track — but in other matters, she's obviously learned the merits of a little understatement.



JAZZ / Mark Miller
Hand Jive by John Scofield
 (Blue Note B2 7243 8 27327)

A GENERAL SHIFT IN DIRECTION

SUCCESS can be a tough act to follow. Guitarist John Scofield had one of the great bands of the recent past until his frontline partner, tenor saxophonist Joe Lovano, departed last year. So what next? Another saxophonist, so soon after the Sco-and-Joe Show had reached such lofty heights? Well, yes, another saxophonist and a keyboard player, a percussionist and a general shift in direction. Scofield has always had a funky side, but he has gone right over the top with the ebullient *Hand Jive*. It's party time. The new man on tenor is a relative old man, Eddie Harris, whose infectious, looping jazz-funk style was popular during the 1960s. Larry Goldings handles piano and organ; Don Alias is the percussionist. Bassist Dennis Irwin and drummer Bill Stewart return as before.

Scofield welcomes Harris aboard with *I'll Take Les*, a vamp tune that makes both literal and musical allusion to the saxophonist's old partner, the pianist and singer Les (Compared to What?) McCann. The remaining nine tracks on *Hand Jive* review the guitarist's now-familiar compositional motifs and devices. In that respect, Scofield's repeating himself here, but he still writes nifty melodies and he has Harris and Goldings to refresh the rest. This isn't quite the illustrious jazz band that its predecessor was, though — Sco' and the guys don't seem to be blowing nearly as hard. Too busy enjoying themselves, probably.

Out of the Loop by The Brecker Brothers
 (GRP GRSD 9784)

In their first incarnation nearly 20 years ago, The Brecker Brothers (Mike, tenor and soprano saxophones; Randy, trumpet and flugelhorn) played a particularly stylized, overheatedly funky form of fusion jazz. This second time around (marked by the release in 1992 of *The Return of the Brecker Brothers*), they've broadened and in some respects genericized their range. They now sound like a band influenced by their former selves, among other significant fusion artists likes Miles Davis and Yellowjackets. Some of *Out of the Loop* is radio-friendly pop (*Secret Heart*, for example, and *When It Was*) and some is superior, latter-day fusion (*Slang*, *Harpoon*). Whichever, both brothers are in hot form — forgiving Mike his inexplicable Kenny G-isms on *Secret Heart*. On that count, nothing much has changed at all.



CLASSICAL / Robert Everett-Green
Olivier Messiaen — Eclairs sur l'au-delà . . .
 Myung-Whun Chung; Orchestre de l'Opéra Bastille
 DG 439 929-2

John Tavener — **Thunder Entered Her**
 David Hill; Winchester Cathedral Choir
 Virgin 7243 5 45035 2

REFLECTIONS ON A GROWTH INDUSTRY

RICHARD Wagner had a lot of stupid ideas, but one that has shown remarkable prescience is his forecast for religious music. Concert halls, not churches, he argued, would in future be the sites for true celebration of the musical divine. Sure enough, church music in our time is moribund, while religious concert music has become a growth industry. Some of our most popular living composers — Henryk Gorecki, Arvo Part, John Tavener — are deeply pious fellows whose music reflects the fact.

The grandfather of the movement, if it can be called a movement, was the late Olivier Messiaen, whose last major work has just been released on CD. *Eclairs sur l'au-delà* (*Illuminations of the Beyond*) is a grand summation of Messiaen's art, in the form of 11 responses to mystical symbols. Messiaen was a great musician who, by melding eccentric Catholicism with avant-garde composition, succeeded in making almost all of his admirers uneasy. His craft was absolute right to the end — he finished this work months before his death at 84 — whether it was applied to evocations of divine grace or of the bird-songs which he methodically catalogued. *Eclairs sur l'au-delà*, written for a vast and richly coloured orchestra, is a beautiful work, but its beauty is hard, like diamonds. It seems to imply that salvation is available, but not for slackers.

Tavener's work, by comparison, is soft as a down pillow. The choral works on Virgin's new album are very pretty, lulling the ear like so many lullabies to God. They're extremely simple pieces, often no more than a liquid tune meandering high above a deep pedal bass. Is this profundity? Some people evidently think so. To my ear, it sounds like a mild, modern simulation of ancient chant — pop gone Gregorian, or Russian Orthodox. That may explain why Tavener's albums have reached the best-seller charts, while Messiaen's never have and probably never will.