

Boston Sunday Globe December 25, 1983

Music

New vitality, faces liven the pop picture

- BEST**
The Police
King Sunny Ade & the African Beats
Emmylou Harris & the Hot Band
Talking Heads
Lionel Richie
- WORST**
Joni Mitchell
Journey
Eurythmics
Sage
Rain Parade

By Steve Morse
Globe Staff

Pop music was on the rebound in 1983. After four years of economic doldrums, the scene received an energy transfusion from stars such as the Police, Michael Jackson and David Bowie. More first aid came from a solid host of overseas acts (Culture Club, Big Country, U2), rejuvenated black stars (Stevie Wonder, Lionel Richie) and leading Third World figures (Eddy Grant, King Sunny Ade and Peter Tosh).

Record revenues rose to \$3.77 billion. That was shy of the \$4 billion glory days of the late '70s, but an impressive 5 percent jump from last year, according to the New York research firm of F. Ekerstadt & Company.

Reasons cited for the increase were an overall improvement in the national economy; a surge in cassette sales (as many cassettes as records were sold for the first time, notably for the 12 million Sony Walkmans in existence, not to mention other portable units); a dropoff in video game interest; and the ever-mounting influence of MTV (Music Television), which now reaches 16 million cable households with its glitzy rock videos.

For many consumers, however, there were still far-reaching concerns. Would MTV, often accused of racism this year, stand by glamorous

"pretty boy" white acts at the expense of quality black groups? Will independent labels be able to survive against the corporate monoliths? And will album-oriented rock stations ever ease their tight playlists and become exciting again? (Boston's most exciting rock station this year, WBOS-FM, was inexplicably switched to a country format just as it was becoming a force.)

For local concert lovers, though, this was a banner year, with consistent quality being the theme. The Worcester Centrum again captured the arena focus, blasting Boston Garden out of the market by virtue of lower costs and keener acoustics, but most notably this was the year shows returned to Foxborough's 61,000-seat Sullivan Stadium after a seven-year lapse. Despite that, sandwiched in feeling stadium fans were treated to three top-notch concerts there.

The Police capitalized on singer Sting's charisma, filling a balmy July night with sweeping tales of moral triumph that followed a strong dance set by the Pixies, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel were beguiling stories of American life enriched by beaming their faces onto a massive video screen shaped like a '50s drive-in theater; and David Bowie, despite being the year's most overhyped star, carried off a classy theatrical show.

A list of peak performances would be incomplete without mentioning King Sunny Ade & the African Beats, whose soaring Afro-fusion uplifted a multiracial crowd at the Bradford Hotel in February; Emmylou Harris, who played two hours-plus of country-rock at the Club Casino in Hampton Beach last summer; the Talking Heads, whose oddball funk enlivened the Providence Civic Center this fall; and Lionel Richie, who exhibited a commanding grasp of many soul music styles from the United States and Caribbean during his autumn soiree at the Worcester Centrum.

As for worsts, there was art-folkie Joni Mitchell's feeble night on the Common, where she walked off stage in disgust at milling fans though these fans should have done the same to her for her ridiculous haughtiness. Then there were teen sensations Journey, who sold out four nights at the Centrum but registered zero on the personality scale; England's Eurythmics, who stumbled through a superpool but empty debut at the Paradise Theater; Sage, a hopelessly bombastic Canadian band that thrashed around the Orpheum; and Rain Parade, which put a Rat crowd to sleep. The latter was one of many neo-psychedelic LA groups to tour this year, all of them (pardon the chauvinism) no match for the Boston psychedelic band the Neats.

Back to the highlights: The Concerts on the Common series stood out with memorable sets by Linda Ronstadt, Willie Nelson and Fat Metteny, among others. Other outdoor gems were the exquisite Arts & Energy Festival in New Hampshire (keyed by Boston bands the Stompers, Robin Lane and I-Tones) and the endearing Cajun-Bluegrass Festival in Escobag, R.I., which featured Louisiana's Queen Ida, Dewey Balfa and Allen Foneron dancing under the stars.

New Music finally became viable this year, helped by stirring shows from Ireland's anthemic U2, Scotland's guitar-based Big Country and England's soulful Culture Club. And the hip side of this craze was the accent on ubiquitous '60s warhorses, with the Band and the Impressions living up to their old standards, but the Animals and Blues Project falling below them.

Black music was shaken by the deaths of bluesmen Muddy Waters and J. B. Hutto, but many R&B veterans persevered gallantly, especially Smokey Robinson (a transporting night at Framingham's Chateau de Ville); Stevie Wonder (six long-remembered shows at the Opera House); and Marvin Gaye, whose Boston Common gig was a mirthful potpourri of sight gags and a mock striptease. As for emerging acts, the best were romantic singer Angela Boffill and the Roxbury wonders New Edition, who scored a No. 1 black hit in "Candy Girl."

The local rock scene was in turmoil from the breakup of singer Peter Wolf from the J. Geils Band, but promising new acts included "Til Tuesday, November Group, Rubber Rodeo and Barrence Whitfield & the Savages.

Country music struggled in Boston (there was an embarrassing lack of big-name bookings other than Willie Nelson), but the acoustic music renaissance went full speed ahead. The old guard of Tom Rush and Joan Baez was as strong as ever, while the local scene stood tall with Bill Morrissey, Deisy Rose, Fred Small, Russ Barenberg and the second anniversary of the Black Sheep Review. Scotland's Silly Wizard played an emotional breakup gig, while folk poet Stan Rogers played an unexpected farewell in April, shortly before a plane crash claimed his life.

Other deserving 1983 shows, at least from those I heard, came from Tom Petty, UB40, Roxy Music, Eddie Murphy, Joe Val, Del-Lords, Del Fuegos, Blasters, Marianne Faithfull, Piddle Fever, Bob Seger, Minnie Pearl, Graham Parker, Grateful Dead, Donna Summer, Tracey Nelson, Juluka, the Neighborhoods, Vernon Oxford, Sleepy LaBeef, U2, Eddie Money, Bluegrass Album Band, Ek-a-Mouse, Carl Perkins, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Raah of Stabtrigs, Eddy Grant, John Lincoln Wright, Richard Thompson, RuthAnna, Reflectors, Townes Van Zandt, Green on Red, Marshall Tucker, Moody Blues, Carlton Bryan, Steve Morse & Morse, Cody Statler Brothers, Love Tractor, Peter Tosh, Fred Frith and Neil Young.

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