

TÊTES NOIRES: Clay Foot Gods.

Ⓞ *Rounder 9008.*

Têtes Noires, now six women strong, started in Minneapolis in 1983 as a charmingly amateurish performance-art project with venomously sarcastic lyrics and a near-throwaway attitude toward the music. They have since grown much more self-assured musically without sacrificing either of the first two elements. The addition of a drummer helps, because on songs like "Bless Me," "The Plain," and "World Turning," it makes more explicit the element of '70s arena rock that has always co-existed in their music along with sturdy melodies, girl-group brightness, and baroque vocal arrangements. They've also learned to let that music do more of the talking: It's the tacky nightclub sound as much as the lyrics of "Pour More Water on Her, George" that reveals the song's Wet T-shirt Contest for the sordid event it is. And their vocal attack, which plays distinctive lead voices against six-part harmonies, remains convincing. Whether taking on Catholic confession ("Bless Me"), the squeeze on the small farmer ("Why Are the Farmers Dying?"), or sexual exploitation and inequality (nearly every other song), they can say the sweetest things so harshly, and the harshest things so sweetly.

John Morthland

DAVE LIEBMAN:

Homage to John Coltrane.

Ⓞ *Owl 046. (Polygram.)*

It has been 20 years since John Coltrane died, and no one since has had his almost incantatory influence over other jazz musicians. Soprano saxophonist Dave Liebman was one of those inspired by what he calls "the intensity and conviction of Trane's music," and *Homage to John Coltrane* is a lyrical tribute to the older saxophonist's style. But while Liebman uses some of Coltrane's devices—the overblown notes and the seesawing phrases—he doesn't seek to recapture that intensity. Whereas Coltrane on "Crescent" was powerfully sombre, Liebman is spare, as he comments over the occasional interjections of drummer Adam Nussbaum and bassist Eddie Gomez. He's more dramatic on "Untitled Original" and offers free improvisations on "Selflessness." With the exception of "Mr. Day," which founders on a two-chord vamp, this *Homage* is successful. It ends, on "Dear Lord," with a kind of prayer. Coltrane was known for his passion; this solo reminds us that he should also be remembered for his radiant serenity.

Michael Ullman

EARTH, WIND & FIRE: Touch the World.

Ⓞ *Columbia FC 40596.*

Separately, Maurice White and Philip Bailey have two of the most alive voices in the business. Together, they're a ten-man chorus. So it's a shame that Earth, Wind & Fire's first release in four years is steeped in mile-high programming that sometimes obscures their natural high. But *Touch the World* is nothing if not contemporary: lots of Prince-funk grooves, references to Reagan and the Contras, kalimba-like samplers that yell "Third World." Charged by the famed Hawkins Family, the title cut is a churchified version of "We Are the World," a good dance rave-up and not a bad campaign song for Jesse Jackson. In "Victim of the Modern Heart," White falls strangely prey to sagging intonation, but Bailey excels throughout: In the majestic ballad "You and I" and the potential hit "Here Today and Gone Tomorrow," his boy soprano is pure, lithe, and melodically ecstatic. The message, as always, is stop, step back, and turn up your light.

Pamela Bloom

STEVE GOODMAN: Unfinished Business.

Red Pajamas RPJ 005. (P.O. Box 36E77, Los Angeles, Calif. 90036.)

This miscellany of previously unreleased radio recordings, demo tapes, and publisher's reference tracks will please avid fans of the late singer/writer Steve Goodman but persuade no newcomers. Of the ten cuts, only the WFMT recording of "(Now and Then There's) A Fool Such as I," in duet with legendary mandolinist Jethro Burns, and the solo acoustic version of "My Funny Valentine" truly stand out. A club performance of Michael Smith's "The Dutchman," a Goodman classic, has been included owing to overwhelming mail requests, but the definitive recording remains the studio arrangement released on *Steve Goodman*, his sturdy 1971 debut, still my favorite. The Grammy Award-winning *Tribute to Steve Goodman*, too, is a better introduction, available from Red Pajamas as a two-record set.

Leslie Berman

BARRY WHITE:

The Right Night & Barry White.

Ⓞ *A&M SP 5154.*

Before Teddy Pendergrass's snarl, Luther Vandross's arpeggios, and Michael Jackson's hiccups, there was Barry White's deep, smooth moan, which compelled a female friend of mine to sigh, "He could make you climax reading the telephone book!" With hits like "Can't Get Enough

of Your Love, Babe," "Never, Never Gonna Give Ya Up," "You're the First, the Last, My Everything," and "It's Ecstasy When You Lay Down Next to Me," White became The Maestro, king of sensual soul during the early '70s. Now he's back, and little has changed. Sure, this album contains lots of '80s instrumentation, but besides the synth whoosh, there's the same sort of sexual poetry, the same lush string arrangements that made White famous. His trademark lyrical simplicity is also here. Except for the elastic "Sho' You Right," which gets the job done on the dancefloor, this comeback shows that during any quiet storm, underneath White satin is still a pretty good place to be.

Havelock Nelson

ANDREW HILL TRIO AND QUARTET:

Shades.

Ⓞ *Soul Note SN 1113. (Polygram.)*

For almost 25 years, pianist Andrew Hill has been releasing records of his highly personal music: Alternately dark and brooding, shimmeringly romantic, and obsessively explosive, his playing has been consistently off-center both rhythmically and harmonically, reflecting the temperament of someone seemingly repulsed by the very thought of cliché. Fortunately, it's an iconoclasm with its own logic, one that sidesteps the expected phrase and still makes a coherent statement. For *Shades*, Hill has assembled a listener-friendly combo that swings with loose-limbed articulation; tenor saxophonist Clifford Jordan is a special treat. But rather than court convention, the pianist then proceeds to dig in and subtly subvert the concepts of the basic modern-mainstream session. Fans will seek this out; others who are open to an original voice, specifically one reflecting a mature radicalism, would do well to follow suit.

Richard C. Walls

K. T. OSLIN: 80's Ladies.

Ⓞ *RCA 5924-1.*

Singer/writer K. T. Oslin worked her way through folk music, commercials, and Broadway show tunes before breaking into country, and her voice readily demonstrates her savvy, showing some of the power of a Janis Joplin, some of the control of a Phoebe Snow—but unfortunately very little of country music tradition. With a couple of exceptions (notably the title cut's fem-lib commentary), these songs stick like glue, both stylistically and thematically, to all the standard and redundant 20th-century pop-love-song formulas. I want more.

Joe Blum