



## Surface Surfaces With A Crossover Hit

Paul Iorio

NEW YORK — "It's scary how you write a song and accidentally touch on a subject that's real sensitive to a lot of people," says Dave Conley of Surface. "Last night it hit me when everyone (at a party) kept saying, 'do you know what your record is doing to us?' It was almost scary the way they were putting it."

Certainly this is the kind of scary few artists fear. Scary or not, Surface is getting across in a big way with "Happy," the first single from their self-titled Columbia debut album, which is turning into one of the big crossover stories of the year.

But, like most breakthroughs, this one was partly accidental; "Happy" would never have happened if it weren't for Conley's twelve year old nephew Steven.

"My nephew ran downstairs and said you gotta come upstairs and see what (bandmember) Dave (Townsend) is doing," says Conley. "So he grabbed me and Bernard (Jackson) and we were listening to Townsend sing this line 'only you can make me happy.' Immediately Bernard picked up his pen and I jumped on the synthesizer and we started working on the song. Inside of an hour the song was complete."

"Every time I hear that record I think of my little nephew and how it hit him. And he's not even into this style of music, he's into rap," says Conley.

Apparently, Surface is appealing to a lot of people who don't normally listen to the type of quiet-storm balladry the trio plays. Not only is "Happy" still top five on the B/C and twelve-inch charts after more than three months, but last week it made the kind of crossover most artists just dream

about, debuting at number 86 bullet on the pop singles chart.

"It's really strange that this record's crossing over into pop now," says Conley. "This is totally unexpected because we're r&b guys strictly and we don't stray away from what we do....It's very soft on the ear, it's not abrasive, it's not fast, it's not slow, it's right in the middle of the road."

Indeed Surface is about as far from rap or hard funk as imaginable. Still, its range and appeal have always been wide, even when they formed in 1983 as a non-performing songwriting trio, writing for such acts as Sister Sledge, Gwen Guthrie, and New Edition.

"We'd like to believe that it doesn't matter what style of music you do," he says. "If you have something that's good people will get into it. If it's good and it just happens to hit home with the lyrics we think that people will just like it. And that's probably what's happening with it crossing over like that, just because of what we're saying and how we're putting it."

Conley believes Surface has just scratched the surface of what they're capable of doing. "The name 'Surface' came up because all of our music was sort of below the surface and as soon as we got a break we decided to name the group Surface because this was the first time that our music actually came out of the basement."

"It took a long time before anything started surfacing," he says. "We were just hitting it so hard trying to get anything to happen. When we decided to put the group together there was really no other name we could even think of using. And we believe we still have things to be surfaced."

AT HIS RECENT BOTTOM Line show, Chris Isaak came off like a digital Presley or a Sun Sessions Springsteen or Johnny Carroll in a turquoise suit, though his stage patter was Richard Price on a binge for sure, and his band, Silverstone, clobbered the beat like few since CCR, and the lead guitarist, ex-Avenger Jimmy Wilsey, a real comer, played with violin brilliance on "Waiting For The Rain To Fall" and swamp know-how on "You Owe Me Some Kind Of Love," overheating just about every song on Isaak's self-titled second album for Warner Bros.

Isaak's new album might do for roots-rock what Robert Cray's "Strong Persuader" did for the blues, though comparisons to "The Wild, The Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle" also obtain if only because Isaak is an artist with enough runaway charisma to break through with a "Born To Run" next time around. In concert he generated the kind of heat that turns gold into platinum, and while his new album is not even near gold, remember that 50,000 units is all "The Wild..." moved in '74. Still, this shouldn't be a waiting game, the guy's ready now; he's got the chops, the tunes, the duds, and a fervid cult following that could easily spill into the mainstream if AOR would give "Heart Full Of Soul" or "You Owe Me Some Kind Of Love" half a chance.



**SHELL SHOCKED FOLK** — Michelle Shocked has been causing a buzz in folk circles lately with her "Texas Campfire Tapes" (Cooking Vinyl) album. She opens for Loudon Wainwright III at Town Hall June 13.

**JOHN FLANSBURGH** of They Might Be Giants organized an AIDS benefit concert at CBGBs featuring performances by six of New York's finest indie bands — Glenn Morrow's Rage To Live, They Might Be Giants, The Ordinaires, Peter Stampfel and The Bottlecaps, The Cucumbers, and The Last Round-Up. Morrow played "Amore Taken" and other new songs, the Giants used a large vaudeville stage hook as a musical instrument, Stampfel revved up "96 Tears," and The Ordinaires did their contrapuntal thing. But more importantly, the concert raised more than \$1,200 to battle an epidemic that Washington refuses to fight in anything resembling a responsible manner. The music industry has already taken the lead with "That's What Friends Are For," which has reportedly raised more than a million dollars so far for the American Foundation For AIDS Research. Now is the time for someone like Bob Geldof to organize a

massive AIDS-Aid benefit concert, enlisting the support of superstars from Bruce Springsteen on down. And if Geldof isn't available, well, maybe Flansburgh has some ideas of his own.

**BRIEFINGS** — Tom Kimmel's "Five To One" (PolyGram) is a debut album of major significance, with ten songs that will probably change a lot of lives. Most persuasive are the last three tracks — "Violet Eyes," the Mellencampish "No Tech" and the powerhouse title track.



**GLORY DAYS** — Steve Earle's "Exit Zero" (MCA) isn't an album — it's an event. For anyone who thought nobody could top "Guitar Town," start with "Nowhere Road" and don't stop.

The song "Five To One" is like a fully-detailed "My Hometown" in which Kimmel vows to "go down swinging" to save a deteriorating neighborhood where there are "bars on the windows when the day is done" and "bars over churches, maybe five to one." It's a knock-out song, well developed by Bill Szymczyk and Bob Clearmountain's production, and it may send the album to the top of the charts. This is Dick Wingate's first signing as PolyGram's senior vp of A&R, and what a way to start. More on Kimmel in a future issue....Arthur Russell, the avant-funkist responsible for Dinosaur L's "Go Bang," and Loose Joints' "Is It All Over My Face," has an album out on Upside called "World Of Echo." With only cello and vocals, Russell creates a sound unlike anybody else's, most effectively on "Let's Go Swimming" and "Wax The Van," which was a dance club hit for Lola....Columbia's Gary Lucas recently brought to my attention the striking similiarity between the cover art of U2's "The Joshua Tree" and that of Captain Beefheart and The Magic Band's "Ice Cream For Crow." Both covers were shot by photographer Anton Corbijn....U2's The Edge wrote, co-produced, and performed the *Captive* film soundtrack, which has just been released by Virgin Records. The ten tracks were written prior to the recording of "The Joshua Tree"....Marshall Crenshaw's new album, "Mary Jean & Nine Others," will be released June 2d by Warner Bros. It was produced by Don Dixon and features backing vocals by Marti Jones....The Midnite Gypsies, who have an album out on Natural Enemies Records, recently played the Central Park Bandshell, and, as on vinyl, their strongest song was the soulful and hooky "Heartache," which alone makes the band worth tracking.

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