

Billboard's Top Album Picks

Copyright 1976, Billboard Publications, Inc. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Billboard SPECIAL SURVEY For Week Ending 11/6/76

Number of LPs reviewed this week **44** Last week **72**

Pop

BILLY PRESTON, A&M SP4587. Who is that grinning, moustachioed dandy in the white tie and tails, tipping his top hat on the jacket? Why, it's Billy Preston, minus his beard and most of his formerly wide flung afro. These days Preston may look like an update of Cab Calloway, but his overall approach remains the same goodtime soul-pop sound with almost rag-time multiple electronic keyboards that has given him a consistent string of hits like "Nothin' From Nothin'." An interesting element here is the several slower, straightforward ballads which find Billy using a warm, mellow vocal range that almost sounds like a different voice than his usual gossamer high-energy. But most of the LP gets effective further mileage out of the established Preston style.

Best cuts: "Do What You Want," "Girl," "When You Are Mine," "Let's Make Love."

Dealers: For displaying this LP, it might be wise to make up large name cards because the artist, jacket photo is so different than his usual look.

THIN LIZZY—Johnny The Fox, Mercury SRM1-1119. Working the bad guy image of its breakthrough "The Boys Are Back In Town" single for all it's worth, the U.K. foursome delivers an LP with high pitched guitars coloring tales of desperate characters betraying women and meeting bad ends such as getting stabbed in alleyways. Irish-mulatto lead singer Philip Lynott delivers all this rocking doom with firm, throaty conviction. The entire package is carefully structured to take maximum advantage of the elements found in the veteran group's long sought recent hit single.

Best cuts: "Johnny," "Rocky," "Borderline," "Massacre," "Johnny The Fox Meets Jimmy The Weed."

Dealers: After years of trying, Thin Lizzy has finally achieved full U.S. visibility.

SALSOUL ORCH.—Christmas Follies, Salsoul S2S5507. A disco Christmas album? Why not. The masters of disco bring the soulful sound of Philadelphia to holiday standards. The outcome is incredibly good and this album could become the biggest holiday season LP in years. Vince Montana has taken all of these tunes and arranged them to sound new and different. In addition to the stalwart playing, there is some fine singing by the same vocal trio featured on many of the hits out of this famed city. "Jingle Bells" has never sounded so good.

Best cuts: "The Little Drummer Boy," "Joy To The World," "Rudolph The Red Nosed Reindeer," and "Auld Lang Sal soul."

Dealers: In-store play will make you sell out quickly. Also, the cover is similar to the last Salsoul LP and should therefore gather some looks.

PURE PRAIRIE LEAGUE—Dance, RCA APL11924. This LP has strong crossover potential from pop to country. The sound on this album is much stronger than on previous efforts. It all cooks from the softer ballads to the hard-rocking number. Lead singers Larry Goshorn and George Ed Powell have several numbers that could get the group back on the hit singles track. While country rock used to be the group's major forte, it demonstrated an ability to transcend musical boundaries and make a go of it across the board now.

Best cuts: "Dance," "In The Morning," "All The Way," "Help Yourself," "All The Lonesome Cowboys."

Dealers: This group is proven seller and the cover art is a continuation of the previous designs, so buyers will recognize it right away. Still, make them aware that this is a new effort.

DONNY AND MARIE—New Season, Polydor PD16083. This dynamic duo should score heavily with an LP loaded with a healthy dose of teen-rock and soul standard interpretations. As usual, the production of Mike Curb gives excellent material and arrangements.

Best cuts: "Ain't Nothing Like The Real Thing," "Anytime Sunshine," "Show Me," "Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me," "Sing," "We Got Love."

Dealers: The television series by this duo and their tv performances of these songs should help sales.

MICHAEL MURPHEY—Flowing Free Forever, Epic PE34220. Yes, it's true that Murphey's previous LP also had fine music in a wide variety of styles and still didn't produce a key single to build on the sales acceptance of "Wildfire." But this new Caribou Ranch album, which mixes high energy urban arrangements and cuts that are predominantly influenced by American Indian symbology, is simply too musically and artistically outstanding not to deserve a full Billboard pick. Murphey is more than a progressive country writer singer, he's an all-around pop creator.

Best cuts: "Flowing Free Forever," "Running Wide Open," "Cherokee Fiddle," "Yellow House."

Dealers: This LP would appeal strongly to fans of artists as disparate as John Denver and Judy Collins. In-store play would give you personal enjoyment as well as boosting sales.

CHUCK MANGIONE—Main Squeeze, A&M SP4612. There is a warm glow to Mangione's music which catapults it high above other contemporary composers working in the pop and jazz combined idiom. Mangione's creative spirit uplifts the compositions he has written and arranged for this date, which features name sidemen. The large orchestral setting provides a broad spectrum for his light and airy style on flugelhorn. Mangione represents the 1970s version of the cool school of horn playing which was popular in the 1950s. The title jumps and bumps with some of the hottest jazz-themed material available today. But what's the catch? In the current musical "craze" era it's one of the only ones not falling through the arrangement.

Best cuts: "Main Squeeze," "I Get Crazy (When Your Eyes Touch Mine)," "The Day After Our First Night Together" (with some soaring, punchy strings), "Love The Feeling" (with some deep, cutting background trombones and funky bass), "If You Know Me Longer Than Tomorrow."

Dealers: Composer's in depth compositions draw buffs in both the pop and jazz idioms.

RUPERT HOLMES—Singles, Epic PE34288. Immaculately tasteful in contemporary pop writing, singing and arranging, Holmes has the equipment to carve out a major position in the market area now dominated by Barry Manilow. His urban-sparrow song themes of the obstacles to love in a crowd are nestled in lush, haunting melodies and arrangements. It's hard to conceive that there wouldn't be a wide young-adult audience for this sophisticated yet universally meaningful talent. Holmes could be the Morris Albert of 1977.

Best cuts: "Weekend Lover," "Singles," "Last Of The Romantics," "Touch And Go," "Who, What, When, Where, Why," "You Made Me Real," "I Don't Want To Get Over You."

Dealers: Holmes has been associated with recent and upcoming Barbra Streisand product. He is a widely known producer.

Soul

OHIO PLAYERS—Gold, Mercury SRM11122 (Phonogram). This compilation LP consists of 11 cuts, nine of which were previously out on four earlier Mercury LPs. The two new cuts, "Feel The Beat (Everybody Disco)," has today's feel to it, and "Only A Child Can Love" is a fair ballad built around a bouncy pace. The large, dramatic production qualities enhance the copyrights, giving this modern soul group a blasting quality which sometimes adds greater strength to its vocal abilities. Time has not stood still for this act since its material has a freshness and candor.

Best cuts: "Skin Tight," "Feel The Beat (Everybody Disco)," "Fire," "Jive Turkey (Part 1)."

Dealers: Group is a consistent seller with a solid crossover potential.

Country

KENNY ROGERS, United Artists UAL689G. A master musician, Rogers has his second solo LP country but with a definite pop crossover appeal. He tackles country evergreens like "Laura (What's He Got That I Ain't Got)" and "Green Grass Of Home" plus some newer numbers. Larry Butler's production is on target, and Rogers blends his smooth voice easily with Nashville musicians. The LP employs 11 guitarists and utilizes the talents of five pianists. Brilliant merging of voice and instruments occurs throughout. Bill Justis' string arrangements and an excellent cover photo add to a powerful release by this polished performer.

Best cuts: "Laura (What's He Got That I Ain't Got)," "I Wasn't Man Enough," "Mother Country Music," "Till I Get It Right," "Lucille," "Lay Down Beside Me."

Dealers: Rogers' solo resurgence has him on the charts and hot. Stock pop, too, to take advantage of those who remember his First Edition days.

MICKY GILLEY—Gilley's Smokin', Playboy PB415. Gilley provides a lively set of downhome country truckstop jukebox ballads balanced with several selections that display his rock tendencies. "Don't The Girls All Get Prettier At Closing Time" and "How's My Ex Treating You" depict the country side of Gilley while "My Babe" and the old Lloyd Price hit, "Lawdy Miss Clawdy," showcase his ability to handle rock'n'country numbers. Gilley comfortably handles a wide range of material from the uptown "L-O-V-E" to Sam Cooke's "Bring It On Home To Me." There's plenty of pumping piano and heavy doses of steel all produced in bright and happy style by Eddie Kilroy.

Best cuts: "Don't The Girls All Get Prettier At Closing Time," "L-O-V-E," "What Is It," "My Babe," "Bring It On Home To Me," "How's My Ex Treating You."

Dealers: Gilley's sixth LP should move even faster than his previous five.

Jazz

LA. EXPRESS—Shadow Play, Caribou P234355 (CBS). This is an excellently formatted tight modern jazz band which communicates in spite of the lack of Tom Scott, who formerly was the lead instrument. The quintet of L.A. name sidemen performs in a Weather Report inspired fashion, with less emphasis on pure hard rock rhythms. Drummer John Guerin sticks close to his jazz roots while delving into cascading, explosive rhythms as the undercoating for Peter Mann's electric guitar. David Luell's soprano, alto, tenor and baritone saxes, Max Bennett's Fender bass, and Victor Feldman's radical sounding lone beating electric keyboards, including synthesizer. The opening cut on side two, "Dance The Night Away,"

is a jolting change of mood—it is a throwaway but good disco spiced tune and the most commercial of the lot.

Best cuts: "Dance The Night Away," "Nordic Winds" (with Joni Mitchell intoning subtle vocal sounds), "Double Your Pleasure."

Dealers: Group is capable of crossing from pop to hardcore modernist jazz with ease.

GEORGE DUKE—Liberated Fantasies, BASF G22835. Although Duke has been improving greatly as a vocalist, he is still a much better keyboard player and should stick closer to it. While there are several cuts that fit into the soulful Norman Connors type of music, the overall effort is best when he is playing piano and synthesizer. Joined by his usual cast of sidemen (Airto, Ndugu, Daryl Stuermer, etc.). Expect substantial FM airplay.

Best cuts: "Don't Be Shy," "Back To Where We Never Left," "Tryin' & Cryin'," "I Can Hear That," "Liberated Fantasies."

Dealers: Place this LP in the Billy Cobham, Frank Zappa and new releases bins, as well as in the ever-increasing Duke section.

BETTY CARTER—Now It's My Turn, Roulette SR5005. This is one of the most listenable LPs in some time. At long last, there's a vocal jazz album that appeals to everyone. Perhaps the most important moment in jazz this past year was the re-emergence of Carter who can sing a song like very few others. On this studio date, she is joined by her regular trio led by pianist John Hicks and the outcome is perfection. There's always talk about someone revitalizing a standard, but Carter demonstrates this from the first note to the last.

Best cuts: "Music Maestro, Please/Swing Brother Swing," "Wagon Wheels," "Most Gentlemen Don't Like Love," "Open The Door," "Just Friends/Star Eyes."

Dealers: In-store play will turn people on to the unique style of this under-appreciated talent.

pop

MELISSA MANCHESTER—Help Is On The Way, Arista AL4095. Vocalist's powerful, pristine range and attack fails to make this 10 cut LP a uniform success. The majority of the material is mediocre, with the charts only fair and Melissa's interpretations just touching the edge of emotion despite her hard working efforts, lots of orchestral flow and spotty background voices. **Best cuts:** "So's My Old Man," "There's More Where That Came From," "Monkey See, Monkey Do" (a perky arrangement but banal lyrics).

SPARKS—Big Beat, Columbia PC34359. On their first Columbia LP, the wonderfully weird brothers Ron & Russell Mael have emerged from the wasteland of white-noise rock and are melding their campy, satirical lyric statements to clean basic rock'n'roll riffs with the help of production star Rupert Holmes. Sparks is as freakily funny as ever and far more accessible. **Best cuts:** "I Want To Be Like Everybody Else," "I Bought The Mississippi River," "I Like Girls."

DAVID CASSIDY—Gettin' It In The Streets, RCA APL11852. Cassidy clearly proves with this album that he is a mature rock writer-singer who has moved eons beyond his earlier bubblegum image as the teen idol of tv's "Partridge Family." What remains to be proved is how easy it will be to get today's record purchasers to accept a Cassidy style that fascinatingly combines wide span Beach Boys harmonies with the science fiction visions of David Bowie lyrics. **Best cuts:** "Gettin' It In The Streets," "Never Saw You Comin'," "I'll Have To Go Away."

MOTT THE HOOPLE—Greatest Hits, Columbia PC34368. Now reorganized with new key personnel, Mott recalls its most successful period with writer-singer Ian Hunter on this collection. With David Bowie's song and production on "All The Young Dudes," the group came to stand for glitter rock. But its sound only took on glitter after mastering the elements of basic rock excitement. **Best cuts:** "All The Young Dudes," "All The Way From Memphis," "Roll Away The Stone."

GRIN, Featuring NILS LOFGREN—The Best Of... Epic PE34247. Lofgren's four albums with his hometown Washington, D.C., group distill a most impressive compilation. Lofgren, now operating as a solo artist, has a rare ability to combine the solid construction of pop hit songs with the all-out energy of hard rock. Good liner notes. **Best cuts:** "Like Rain," "Heavy Chevy," "We All Sing Together."

ENGLAND DAN & JOHN FORD COLEY—I Hear The Music, A&M SP4613. Now a major record act on Big Tree due to the hit single "I'd Really Love To See You Tonight" and its top 20 album, the team is represented here by some fine-quality work recorded during a stint on A&M. According to the liner notes, only four of the songs were ever previously released and these four are not currently available elsewhere. **Best cuts:** "Used To You," "New Jersey," "I Hear The Music."

NEW RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE—Best Of... Columbia PC34367. The pleasant western rock of San Francisco's Riders has never fit neatly enough into programming categories to make a breakthrough via singles. But these well-chosen cuts focus in on a band that at its best can be most satisfying in relaxed, good humored music and entertainment. **Best cuts:** "I Don't Know You," "Panama Red," "Henry."

TEN YEARS AFTER—Classic Performances, Columbia PC 34366. Classics of heavy-metal pioneer rocking indeed are these cuts featuring the slashing riff guitar of Alvin Lee. Some like "I'd Love To Change The World" are surprisingly familiar

First Time Around

ALPHA BAND, Arista 4102. Several months ago, the three leaders of the Alpha Band were working as members of Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue. Based on the impact this LP should create, it's a cinch to say that they will have long healthy life in the business. The material is so diverse—from T-Bone Burnett's honky-tonk space rock to Steven Soles Dylanesque ballads—that this LP should explode on all fronts. Perhaps the buffering force in the music is the multi-faceted instrumental work of David Mansfield on guitar, pedal steel, fiddle, mandolin and assorted other instruments. This is one of the most impressive first efforts of 1976.

Best cuts: "Interviews," "Cheap Perfume," "Keep It In The Family," "The Dogs," "Arizona Telegram," "Dark Eyes," "Last Chance To Dance."

Dealers: While the Dylan alliance will make the group have an instant identity, it would be wise to play the music and let people hear the strong material.

TRAVIS, SHOOK AND THE CLUB WOW, Just Like Real, JLR333. Chandler Travis and Stephen Shook are immensely popular on the Northeast campus concert circuit. On this first effort, they display some of the excellent folk-rock-jazz excitement that is heard in concert. Joined by an assortment of other Boston musicians (reedman John Payne, drummer Alan Dawson and various members of NRBQ), this duo squares off on an assortment of originals that establishes them as excellent writers.

Best cuts: "Great Point Song," "Bob Gets A Girl," "Time Marches On," "It's Not Too Late."

Dealers: This small label out of Maynard, Mass., is worth searching out.

Billboard's Recommended LPs

via years of FM play. Ten Years After was a seminal English hard rock breeding ground and the music here is a fine value although some liner notes would have added greatly. **Best cuts:** "I'd Love To Change The World," "Tomorrow I'll Be Out Of Town," "It's Getting Harder."

PRELUDE—Back Into The Light, Pye, Pye-12139. The smooth, haunting vocal trio blend that is best remembered for its a cappella version of Neil Young's "After The Goldrush" returns to the U.S. record market with a well-produced set that uses the full resources of studio instruments. Very pretty tasteful. **Best cuts:** "Woman To Love," "Feel Like Loving You Again," "The Night That New York Cried."

CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT—Dinner With Drac, PIP6822. This is a good gimmick LP featuring some trendy tunes as performed by an even trendier cast of musicians: Count Dracula, Wolfman, the Mummy, Frankenstein's Monster, Igor the Hunchback, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are all featured on the LP playing a full regiment of instruments. The group performs good enough to make this LP a contender. **Best cuts:** Listen and see which ones will fit into your format.

VARIOUS ARTISTS—Peter And The Wolf, RSO RSO-1-3001. Don't prejudice this highly unusual LP. It's not a children's album, nor is it likely to be a bonanza for easy listening stations. Rather, it's a progressive rock adaptation of the classic tale, along the lines of some of Rick Wakeman's albums over the past few years. **Best cuts:** "Rock And Roll Celebration," "Final Theme," "Wolf And Duck."

STEPPENWOLF—The Best Of Steppenwolf (Reborn To Be Wild), Epic PE34382. These cuts, mostly full-out rock, are culled from the several Epic LPs the group made when it reunited a couple of years back. Although the quality of the re-joined Steppenwolf and John Kay's intense vocals are as good as ever, there has been a disappointing lack of major sales breakthroughs. Perhaps this sort of a "best cuts" collection can help. **Best cuts:** "Straight Shootin' Woman," "Smokey Factory Blues," "Skulduggery."

JIMMIE SPHEERIS—Ports Of The Heart, Epic PE34276. One of the most underrated songwriter/singers around, Spheres' lyrics are intensely personal statements in a poetic mode set to music. Among the musicians abetting his alternating acoustic guitar and piano are Stanley Clarke and Chick Corea, while Jackson Browne provides background harmonies. Spheres' mellow, easy going vocals remain soothing without getting repetitious. **Best cuts:** "Bayou Eyes," "Child From Nowhere," "Hills In My Head," "If It's You They're Dreaming Of."

ROGER TROY, RCA APL11910. A veteran of groups ranging from the Hollywood Argyles to the New Electric Flag, Troy is not a bad writer either. As a solo artist, he sounds a bit like a more laidback David Clayton-Thomas but has his own sound, especially in the higher notes. **Best cuts:** "Don't Put The Blame On Me Baby," "Don't You Have Any Love In Your Heart," "Shine On Love."

(Continued on page 70)

Spotlight—The most outstanding new product of the week's releases and that with the greatest potential for top of the chart placement; **picks—**predicted for the top half of the chart in the opinion of the reviewer; **recommended—**predicted to hit the second half of the chart in the opinion of the reviewer, or albums of superior quality. Albums receiving a three star rating are not listed. Review editor: Nat Freedland; reviewers: Eliot Tiegler, Gerry Wood, Jim Fishel, Jim Melanson, Is Horowitz, Ed Harrison, Jean Williams, Paul Green.