

Women musicians, conscience figure prominently in 1988 LPs

By Rick Heyman
Emerald Contributor

1988 was a very good year for popular music. The best music of the year asked us, as Bruce Hornsby did, to "Look out any

Record Reviews

window ... and see what's going on around you." Sure we had our share of "Let me do it to you baby, uh huh" songs — but so did the '60s. 1988 was, like many of the past few years, a time to comment on the problems of our times.

The other supposedly big story of 1988 was that women made the best music. Sure, six out of my top ten were women (seven if you count Tina Weymouth of Talking Heads), but that is only a touch over 50 percent. The fact that women were making great music and that they were receiving attention for it probably has a lot more to do with the sexism of the industry than with women all of a sudden making music worth listening to.

The all of a sudden part, however, is noteworthy. That Tracy Chapman, Toni Childs, Michelle Shocked, Edie Brickell, (and Sinead O'Connor, whose album came out in late 1987 but became widely heard only in 1988) should produce such excellent debut albums is news. These women did not come to our attention because Suzanne Vega made it fashionable with "Luka," as some industry people suggest. The supposed fad of socially con-

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scious, folk-tinged women singers reached the upper heights of my best-of list because of their sheer raw talent — the kind of talent that would have busted through anything that would have tried to stop them.

Chapman's album, my pick for the best of 1988, is one of the finest debut albums of the rock era. The emotional power of her record, brilliantly depicting the lives of people for whom it is not Morning in America, is awesome. Some people criticize her for being overly gloomy — they may agree with what she's saying but find the tone of the record too dark for sustained listening. Although I strenuously disagree with the idea that it is not a listenable record (albeit one for which one must be in the proper mood), her ability to maintain that sharp and dark focus is one of the highlights of the debut record but may be one of the difficulties of her career. She's got to be able to change gears a little in order to stay interesting. Nonetheless, Tracy Chapman will stand as a testimony to the brutality of the Reagan era and to the initial brilliance of Chapman. My hunch is that she's our Bob Dylan and will enjoy equal longevity.

Talking Heads went international (again), and the result

was quite possibly the best they have made to date. Crowded House proved that the pop charms of their debut were no fluke. *The Temple of Low Men* was a bit darker in tone but gave us some of the most memorable, hook-laden songs since the Beatles.

Some people may be getting sick of U2, but the backlash against *Rattle and Hum* is unfair. *Rattle and Hum* is raw and chancy, but it is also good. It is almost certainly an album before its time. This anti-U2 swing may be caused partly by the commercialization of the tour — See the movie! Hear the album! Read the book! — but it was also inevitable. Going from a college radio favorite to the Most Important Band In The World is not easy, but U2 is walking the tightrope well.

R.E.M. is also prepared to make the same jump U2 did.

ues to quietly make complex and chancy music, making "Chalk Mark" one of the least-appreciated albums of the year. Such is the pattern of her career, and "Chalk Mark" may eventually become highly regarded and influential like some of her initially ignored '70s work did.

All in all, a very good year. Making a top ten list would have left off far too many good records. Even a top twenty seemed too restrictive. So I settled on twenty-five. Even then I had to leave off some good records, and decided to exclude all live and "best of" records.

1. Tracy Chapman
2. Talking Heads — *Naked*
3. Crowded House — *Temple of Low Men*
4. U2 — *Rattle and Hum*
5. R.E.M. — *Green*
6. Toni Childs — *Union*
7. Joan Armatrading — *The*

Tracy Chapman will stand as a testimony to the brutality of the Reagan era.

They signed with a major label and then produced their sharpest, clearest record yet. The lyrics not only could be heard but also deserved to be heard.

Toni Childs' debut may not have garnered the same attention as Chapman's, but Childs' big voice also demands to be heard. Childs has a husky, remarkable voice that can range from the powerful (her hit "Don't Walk Away") to the graceful and subtle. She will, without a doubt, become a big

Shouting Stage

8. Marti Jones — *Used Guitars*
9. Joni Mitchell — *Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm*
10. Anita Baker — *Giving You the Best that I've Got*
11. Waterboys — *Fisherman's Blues*
12. T-Bone Burnett — *The Talking Animals*
13. Morrissey — *Viva Hate*
14. Edie Brickell and New Bohemians — *Shooting Rubberbands at the Stars*
15. Graham Parker — *The Mona Lisa's Sister*
16. Godfathers — *Birth, School, Work, Death*
17. Paul Kelly — *Under the Sun*
18. Richard Thompson — *Amnesia*
19. Midnight Oil — *Diesel and Dust*
20. John Hiatt — *Slow Turning*
21. Big Country — *Peace in our Time*
22. Michelle Shocked — *Short Sharp Shocked*
23. James Taylor — *Never Die Young*
24. INXS — *Kick*
25. Traveling Wilburys

star in the '90s.

Joan Armatrading made the best album of her career examining the dark side of love with *The Shouting Stage*. It is the type of album that Tracy Chapman may be making in a few years. Marti Jones and Anita Baker proved that singing other peoples' songs can still work out brilliantly.

Finally, Joni Mitchell contin-



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