

Straw, McKee debut with solid performances

By Rick Heyman
Emerald Contributor

The Call — *Let the Day Begin*
The Call's forced, strained, and utterly mediocre coliseum rock adds new meaning to the

Music Review

old adage that many are called but few are chosen.

Syd Straw — *Surprise*
One of the best debuts of the year. Straw's voice is a bit thin, but she is nevertheless a first-rate vocalist because she sings with assurance, warmth, and character — qualities many technically better singers only dream about. The songs (nearly all co-written by Straw) are quirky but catchy and enticing, while Straw's production is layered without being too slick.

The star-studded supporting cast includes Michael Stipe, Marshall Crenshaw, Ry Cooder, and Richard Thompson, among many others.

Maria McKee
Lone Justice's lead singer strikes out on her own with extraordinary results. McKee's vocal power now is used judiciously — she doesn't just belt out songs like in the past. Now, her voice swells and drops, revealing fantastic control and sounding like a country-rock Aretha Franklin.

Lou Ann Barton — *Read My Lips*
Barton too was compared to Franklin after her Glen Frey-produced 1982 debut. Barton, however, hasn't had McKee's luck — dropped by Warner Brothers in a purge that included Bonnie Raitt and Van Morrisson. Barton is now inexplicably toiling in obscurity.

Read My Lips, her third album, is a decidedly low-budget affair released on a small blues label from Texas. It's blusier and has less commercial glaze than either of its predecessors, which makes it come out of the speakers with less crack but with more of a blues-club flair. Lou Ann's voice and choice of material make it well worth hunting down.

Marshall Crenshaw — *This Evening*
Crenshaw, like countless others whose debut's received wild critical and public support, has yet to outgrow the "We liked his first album better" syndrome. It's a shame, because Crenshaw continues to make good on all the catch-'60s-pop expectations of the de-

but, but has yet to really generate the sales that someone of his stature deserves.

This Evening was co-produced by David Kershenbaum (Tracy Chapman, Joe Jackson) and strikes a balance between the pure pop jangle of *Marshall Crenshaw* and the moodier *Downtown*. *This Evening* is an invigorating reaffirmation that pop music can be catchy as hell without being inane.

Peregrins
Another fine, David Kershenbaum-produced record. This New York-based band mines the same territory as 10,000 Maniacs. On songs like "Let It Go" or "True Believer" they sound like the rockier cousin of the folkier Maniacs. But on "History of the World," you'd think they were channeling for Natalie Merchant. An enjoyable debut.

Godfathers — *More Songs About Love and Hate*

This follow-up gives me the second album slump blues. *Birth, School, Work, Death*, with its wall of guitars and blustery, venom-spitting delivery was hailed on these pages as the best punk record since *The Clash*.

This time around the guitars teeter toward radio metal and

the lyrics are muddled relationship vignettes which lack the burning, cynical glare that made the debut so jolting. Not a debacle on the scale of *Combat Rock*, but it would sure be nice to hear this band's enviable punch used for more worthy a song than the likes of "She Gives Me Love."

End of Innocence — *Don Henley*

Wildly inconsistent. There are a few songs, like the title track, which are among the finest songs he's ever written. Even the weaker songs benefit from the hard-edged sound and Henley's cynical indictments, though a few fall embarrassingly flat.

The first four songs easily justify the price of admission, but, as with the previous two solo records, it contains about half an album's worth of the type of material that we've come to expect from him. If he could only rescue Glen Frey from Partytown, between the two of them they might be able to write an album's worth of material every few years.

Overall, a very good album, but you have to take the mediocre few cuts along with the brilliant ones.

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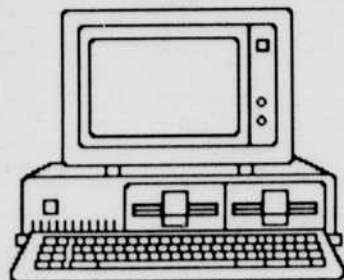
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