

Concrete Blonde A new album, a new outlook, a new life

By MONA BLABER
Daily Illini, U. of Illinois

Pain makes for great art. But as Concrete Blonde's Johnette Napolitano knows, it makes life a living hell. It was emotional turmoil that spurred Concrete Blonde's breakthrough multi-platinum album, *Bloodletting*, and its heart-wrenching hits, "Joey" and "Caroline." But while even more problems have beset band members since recording that album, the outlook on their upcoming release, *Walking in London*, seems to have brightened a bit.

"That was a very bad year for me," said Napolitano, the group's singer, bassist and primary songwriter, of the time spent recording *Bloodletting*. "I really wanted to hide after that record was made. I felt like, God, I've really cut myself open here. It's so ironic that it did well, because if there was any record that I would have rather locked in a closet, it would have been (*Bloodletting*)." But more problems were to follow. While on tour to support the album, Napolitano's back fused from the constant weight of her bass. Then, while in Mexico City, she contracted salmonella, but wouldn't seek treatment because she doesn't like doctors. When she finally went to a hospital, physicians couldn't find a pulse. One doctor told her mother that Johnette was 20 minutes away from dying. Although that experience will keep the band from touring while she recuperates, Johnette said it motivated her to stretch her creative limits.

"These near-death experiences are really great for your priorities," she said. "I laid there and said, you know, I'm 34 years old, and if I go, I don't nearly have the volume of work behind me that I should have." So she set out to create *Walking in London*. While the album showcases much of the deep-seeded angst that made "Joey" and "Caroline" hits on the last album, it also expands into a few more upbeat themes. "I'm pretty pleased with the progress that I have made, and I appreciate a lot of things more. I'm able to be stimulated and inspired by different things more than just being miserable, and I think it shows."

Despite these setbacks, Napolitano has also carved a niche as a role model for fans tired of seeing women in rock portrayed solely as sex symbols. Like vocalists Natalie Merchant of 10,000 Maniacs and Edie Brickell, Napolitano takes pride that she doesn't have to "wave my tits in front of the camera."

And even if *Walking in London*, (due in stores March 10), doesn't eclipse the impressive sales and reviews of *Bloodletting*, Napolitano knows she's walking in the right direction. The woman some call the best female vocalist in rock 'n' roll now can enjoy her ability.

"I think if you can do art that enables someone to forget about their day-to-day existence and take them somewhere else, then you've done a very important thing for people," she said. "I'm a lot happier now with my ability to do that. I think it's a gift."

Major labels started signing any angst-ridden young band with bad hair they could find. They started their own subsidiary labels which, according to Scott Carter, national director of college promotions for A&M Records, "operate and are staffed like an independent label." Then they brutally phased out vinyl — the only format most beginning bands can afford.

And, most importantly for college radio, labels started a veritable mill of promotional pressure: hours of phone calls, gobs of promotional flyers, thick and hairy hype about "this new band" and "that new record." Major label service — or sending free recordings to the media — was consistent,



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Napolitano: the best female vocalist in rock and roll?

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VINCE GOLDBERG (DAILY CALIFORNIAN, U. OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY)
COVER PHOTO BY JOHN STOOPS, OREGON DAILY EMERALD, U. OF OREGON

Can college DJs bite the hand that feeds them?

By LAURA SCHMIDT
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When Nirvana's major-debut, *Nevermind*, topped the Billboard charts in January, a statement was made.

A few years before, the plaid-clad nihilists were an underground sensation for the alternative label Sub Pop. Now they're selling more albums than Michael Jackson or Garth Brooks. Alternative music is no longer alternative; it is big business.

Nowhere is the trend more visible than in college radio. Once the medium for innovative, fearless and thought-provoking music, critics argue college radio is now just another tool of the notorious industry marketing machines.

"It sucks," Matador Records Co-Manager Gerard Cosloy said of college radio. "It's completely awful. Very homogeneous. The only difference between college radio and commercial radio is that someone's listening to commercial radio."

Daniel Makagon, music director of KXLU, the station at Loyola Marymount U. in Los Angeles, agrees.

"(College radio) blows," he said. "It was, at one time, the only challenging musical outlet as far as media goes. ... But now it's watered down."

How did the status of college radio disintegrate from that of a true artistic outlet to something looked upon with near-revulsion? Many in radio point their fingers at major labels. They say that when the big labels identified college students as music-loving, money-spending individuals, college radio — the easiest method of "hooking" this consumer gold mine — was doomed.

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ubiquitous and overwhelming. Stations that used to get a majority of recordings from independent labels were flooded with major label "alternative" or "college" material.

Eric Rose, music director for KUSF at the U. of San Francisco, says although there are some promoters who are understanding of his station's programming philosophy, "there are some who will go to any length to get their record on our station." Such lengths extend from promoters calling stations every day for weeks, asking music directors to give a certain record another chance — all the way to threatening to cut service if a record is not added to the station's rotation.

Carter, however, says that's all part of the game. "There are some people who apply pressure to music directors. But, by and large, threats (to cut service) don't happen," he said. "(Promoters) are salesmen. They obviously try to trump up their music."

Dave Rosecrans, promotions director for Sub Pop, states it simply. "While I couldn't give a shit about college radio, I still want them to do what I want them to do," he said.

But others in the music industry say college radio is to blame for its own demise. Makagon, who wrote his senior thesis on independent music, says major labels may be a corruptor — but only the weak can be corrupted.

"The pressure's part of it, but music directors ... don't want to seek anything new and they don't want to help encourage their DJs to find something new," he said. "If they were go-getters and open-minded enough, they would be able to say (to a promoter), 'Fuck you. Your music's trash, and I'm not going to play it.'"

Les Scurry, music director for KFJC at Foothill College, Calif., agrees college radio needs dedicated talent.

"(College radio is) mostly college students wanting to be cool," Scurry said. "One guy joined our station because he thought he could get laid. That doesn't show much interest in radio."

College radio, the independent labels say, must seek out new music. If a station isn't taking musical chances, they say they shouldn't be expected to take financial ones. Most indies are proud that they don't equate music with money.

As Matador Records' Cosloy puts it, "If we were in this for the money, we would sell crack, child pornography ... or Nirvana records."



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Nirvana: smells like lots of money.