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Bad? Who's bad?

Marianne Faithfull's raw emotion reigns supreme; emotion is absent from Michael Jackson's latest; 10,000 Maniacs produces an album which combines direction and restraint.

BY DR. TANTALUS

It's a tough world out there these days, but now I understand that Michael Jackson wants my butt. Yours, too, by the sound of it. "Your butt is mine!" squeals Michael at the beginning of *Bad*, the latest album from the world's most entertaining mannequin.

Don't get me wrong. Jackson is a talented dancer, singer and composer who has polished his talents to near perfection. However, I cannot imagine Michael Jackson saying that he wants



E. Ann Hinds

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my butt in a way that I would find remotely convincing. I'm willing to be proven wrong, of course, but neither the title track of *Bad* nor the video give me a compelling reason to believe him.

Dressed in black leather with enough studs, clasps and zippers to make Diana Ross jealous, Jackson grabs his crotch and pumps his hips back and forth to make sure that we understand just how bad he is. But this display seems too calculated to carry any emotional weight and not convincing enough to change our impression of Jackson as a multi-talented performer whose life was inexorably twisted by fame at the age of five.

Our best performers not only entertain us, but also bridge the gap between themselves and audience by conveying their unique sense of time, place and feeling. Their message speaks to our shared experiences, our hearts and our sense of truth. This is the reason why a song like *Blowin' in the Wind* retains its vitality on its hundredth repetition, and why *I Think We're Alone Now* can never exceed its pop milieu. No matter how inviting they may seem, such songs are simply cotton candy for the brain. They tell us no more on the tenth playing than they do on the first.

The tragedy here is that Jackson the performer is able to convey the emotion inherent within the song. *Billie Jean* was not a song with a great message, but you could feel the anguish of the false accusation. But when the lyrics get as confused as they do on *Bad*, Jackson is left with nothing worthy of his performance capabilities.

In contrast to the pop pyrotechnics found on *Bad*, Marianne Faithfull has opted to open her veins on her latest release, *Strange Weather*.

Faithfull weaves songs that range in style from Billie Holliday to the Rolling Stones into a unified display of frayed nerves, jagged edges and shattered lives.

Despite her raw power — some songs sound like Judgment Day — the album is not easily assimilated at one sitting. In answering the musical question, "To bleed or not to bleed" in the affirmative, Faithfull has produced an album that only the faithful may be content to hear.

While Faithfull has produced an album in which emotion reigns supreme and Jackson one where emotion seems absent or confused, the latest release by 10,000 Maniacs has produced a record that combines both emotional direction as well as emotional restraint.

Led by Natalie Merchant's arresting vocals, *10,000 Maniacs* explores a range of topics: child abuse, alcoholism, peace, Jack Kerouac and Verdi dot the landscape. Moreover, the standard verse/chorus format has been abandoned for narrative approach that borrows from a poetic tradition of internal rhyme and free verse.

The Doctor's heavy metal and punk patients may wish to avoid this album — it does have a version of Cat Stevens' *Peace Train* — but everyone else should rush themselves down to their local record stores and grab a copy before they disappear.

So in answer to the question "Who's Bad?" the Doctor leaves it to his fearless readers to decide. Is it the pop star who gives the audience what it expects, the woman exploring Dante's inferno, or the group that seeks a different ground upon which to stand? Or is it time to ask Carol what's behind Door No. 3?

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