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just out ▼ 30 ▼ August 1990

Back on the chain gang—again

The Pretenders back in business

BY DR. TANTALUS

Ten years ago a girl transplanted from Ohio to London in search of fame and fortune released an album of tender love songs and hard driving rockers that received plaudits from critics and fans alike. The slower tunes became radio favorites, especially "Brass in Pocket," and "Stop Your Sobbing."

The nail chewing, venomous rockers used the "F" word, made suggestions like "let's do it on the pavement" ("Precious") and referenced the strange habits of bikers she either knew or imagined ("Tattooed Love Boys"). Those old enough to remember when Flossie's was the Bushes may recall seeing Doctor Tantalus bouncing around the dance floor to "Mystery Achievement" off that same album.

It's been ten years since that groundbreaking album appeared and Chrissie Hynde still calls her band the Pretenders, although the lineup has changed steadily over the last decade. After the 1981 release of

Music

Pretenders II, guitarist James Honeyman Scott and bassist Pete Farndon died directly or indirectly as a result of drug use.

There was some question whether the band could continue after such severe losses but the 1983 "comeback" album, *Learning to Crawl*, proved that Hynde could take that trademark sound and graft it onto a set of new musicians.

Learning to Crawl, as the title implies, was an album about starting over, a theme best exemplified by one of the Pretenders' best songs, "Back on the Chain Gang." As a metaphor for her reappearance on the music scene, "Chain Gang" is simultaneously sad, eerie and compelling as a tribute to her lost mates.

The Doctor forgets the personal reasons why Hynde's next recording effort was the 1986 release of "Get Close."

The album's elegance and grace, as well as an infusion of some funk, added a new dimension to the Pretenders's musical vocabulary.

Worth particular mention on that album was "How much did you get for your soul?" a first-class putdown of Michael Jackson accepting sponsorship from Pepsi for his tour. Such commercial sponsors now back everyone from the Rolling Stones to the Who, but you will probably never see them back the Pretenders. "Right up to the top/Millions of kids are looking at you/You say 'let them drink soda pop'."

It's been a few years since that last album and what do you know? Yep, the Pretenders are back in business. Another new lineup, another collection of finely crafted pop songs and that same unique Pretenders's sound.

Packed!—the 1990 Pretenders entry into the summer music sweepstakes—takes up right where the Pretenders left off. This has spawned some criticism, but if the album's lead song, "Never do That" appears to borrow some of its riffs from "Back on the Chain Gang" then at least Chrissie is stealing from herself and not someone else. Nor does the fact that the current recording has more mid-tempo numbers than might be desired by hard-core fans become a distraction. The voice remains clear and true and the tough girl on the outside with the heart of gold inside still shines forth.

Nowhere is this more clear than on the single "Sense of Purpose," in which our heroine asks her lover to give her some reasons to go on. That is somewhat ironic, since for the past ten years Chrissie Hynde has had the gump-tion, drive and yes, sense of purpose, to keep on



movin' on.

More fire is provided by such songs as "Downtown" about her native Akron, and "Hold a Candle to This," in which she comments, among other things, on Nancy Reagan's handgun and interracial sex in the Navy ("same meat—different gravy").

If truth be told—and Nurse Conuelo is a stickler for that—*Packed!* is not the greatest album the Pretenders have ever released, but it makes most other recordings on the market seem half-baked. And considering how fresh those earlier recordings remain, it won't be surprising if ten years from now *Packed!* will have improved in our assessment.

And now for something completely different: Those looking for dance records this summer may want to pass up the obvious and try two recent collections. The first, *FFRR—Gold On Black 1990*, is a terrific sampling of soulful tunes, including D-Mob's "C'Mon and Get Your Love" and "Dirty Mind" by Shakespeare's Sister. Available as a double album or single CD, it's hard to resist the smooth sounds of Diana Brown and Barrie K. Sharpe on "The Masterplan" or Satoshi Tomie's "And I loved you."

On the other side of the dance universe is "Welcome to the Technodrome," whose title more than demonstrates what the listener should expect to find. Although both the Doctor and Nurse Conuelo confess that this music doesn't exactly tickle our collective G spot (it can sometimes sound like the perfect background music for an auto assembly plant), it seems like a representative sampler of the robotic end of the dance music spectrum. Our favorite is Axodry's "You." And don't worry: We don't know who Axodry is, either. A German sampler, this is probably available only on CD.

Finally, those in need of a Morrissey fix have already purchased the latest single, "November spawned a Monster." What will that poet/queer/rocker think of next? And those in need of more mainline dance relief would be better steered toward "World in Motion" by New Order and England. A tribute to the British soccer team, the single is great, even if the socially responsible thing to do would be to de-emphasize soccer among those rowdy and violent British hooligans who riot whenever their team loses.

In August, remember to check out the tour "Escape from New York," with Deborah Harry, Tom Tom Club, Jerry Harrison, and the Ramones. They'll be appearing at the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall on Tuesday, August 14, at 7:30 p.m.