



"Nebraska"

Bruce Springsteen's new album "Nebraska" (Columbia) will be quite a surprise to many of his fans. Springsteen was in a very dubious position prior to the release of "Nebraska." Each album Springsteen released in past years has received more critical acclaim than his last. His previous effort, "The River" was hailed by many as his "masterpiece." Springsteen was under a lot of pressure to produce another "Classic" album of high-spirited rock 'n' roll.

Instead of delivering what was expected of him, he took an alternate route and released "Nebraska"—an imaginative and risky album that is neither high-spirited nor rock 'n' roll.

In this era of digital multi-track studios, Springsteen chose to record Nebraska in his New Jersey home on a track cassette recorder. The songs are stripped down to just Springsteen's vocals, acoustic guitar, and harmonica. Gone is his backup group, the "E Street Band," with the jingle-jangle guitars, honky-tonk keyboards, and wailing saxophone.

The songs are sparse, uncomplicated portraits of winners and losers in American culture, written in typical Springsteen commonman language. Side one starts with the title cut "Nebraska." The sad lyrics and haunting vocals are as grim as the subject—Nebraska mass-murderer Charles Starkweather. The song doesn't pass judgement, stating that "a meanness in this world" prompted the murders.

"Atlantic City," the album's strongest cut, tells of a man deep in debt who is "tired of comin' out on the losin' end" and resorts to being a hired gun for the mob. Springsteen assumes the voice of the hit man and rationalizes his work: "Everything dies baby that's a fact, but everything that dies someday comes back."

The monotone vocals on "Highway Patrolman" set the mood of the song, expressing the fraternal love between an honest cop, Joe Roberts, and his no-good brother Frank. Joe manages to look the other way when Frank causes trouble in town, showing that their blood runs thicker than the law.

Side two is more optimistic and carefree, depicting honest characters, but fails to arouse the emotions as side one does. "Used Cars" tells of a dreamer who vows to buy a new car the day he wins the lottery. "Open All Night" follows, the liveliest song on the album, sounding like a stripped-down "Cadillac Ranch."

If you're expecting the free-spirit rock 'n' roll of Springsteen's earlier albums, then "Nebraska" will be a radical change of pace. It is a state-of-the-Union message that will rate among his best work.

Heroes' Debut

Robert Hazard and the Heroes' debut album (R.H.A.) is proof that the powers that be in the music industry can't keep a good band down. Unable to find any major record companies to back him, Hazard recorded the album in a small independent studio in his native Philadelphia. The album was heavily promoted by both Hazard and influential Philadelphia rock stations. As a result, Hazard got the last laugh on the major labels, who are not approaching him with offers.

The E.P. (extended play) album consists of five cleverly crafted new wave dance songs. The killer cut on the album is the "Escalator of Life"—Hazard's national anthem for all the shopping mall consumers. The song opens with ethereal synthesizer notes that are bottomed-out by a droogy techno-pop bass riff. The

monotone chorus sets the futuristic tone of the song, telling of the fun times spent in consumer America.

"We're riding on the escalator of life

We're shopping in the human mall

We've dancing on the escalator of life

Won't be happy till we have it all."

"Change Reaction" follows—a spirited romp expressing the importance of being young and free, with a keyboard hook that symbolizes the optimism of the song. Song two contains a cover version of the old Bob Dylan standard, "Blowin' in the Wind." Hazard takes the easygoing song and converts it into a protest song complete with angry vocals and the hottest guitar solo on the album. The remaining songs, "Out of the Blue" and "(I Just Want to) Hang Around With You" are the album's weakest cuts with innocuous lyrics and a familiar dance beat.

Hazard's impressive debut album, while not breaking any new ground, has set him apart from the crowd of new wave bands in Philadelphia and should soon see him as a major national act.

Dire Straits

On their 4th and latest album, "Love Over Gold," Dire Straits make it known that they're not interested in being a "commercial" band. The average length of the songs is well over seven minutes, which will prohibit much radio airplay. They are content to rely on their loyal fans to give the

album a chance. Indeed, Dire Straits does not produce "background music"—their songs require full concentration by the listener.

The focal point of the album is "Telegraph Road," a 14-minute epic which takes full advantage of Mark Knopfler's unique guitar style (plucking guitar strings with his fingers instead of guitar picks). The song parallels the growth of a coal mining town with the growth of a young man who is alienated by the complexity of the town. The young man becomes disillusioned with the "six lanes of traffic" full of people "driving home from the factories" and discovers that there is no work to be found. He longs for days gone by when the economy was stronger and "life was just a bet on a race between lights." The song often builds to a climax and then allows Knopfler to relax the listener with his mellow pyrotechnics.

"Private Investigations" offers the plight of a District Attorney and his thankless job. The song begins humbly enough but quickly gets bogged down by the overblown production and depressing lyrics.

"Industrial Diseases," contrary to its gloomy title, is a playful satire on how industry "hushes up" the reports of work-related illnesses. The song is driven along by a buoyant synthesizer riff and brightens up an otherwise dull side two.

The title cut "Love Over Gold" and "It Never Rains" fill out the remainder of the album. Both songs are overproduced, containing rather obscure lyrics and nondescript melodies.

The end result is that "Love Over Gold" is a good album that, with a less self-indulgent approach, could have been a great one.

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