

SINGLES

BY GAVIN MARTIN

AS NEAR AS IT GETS TO A SINGLE OF THE WEEK

THE SYSTEM: You Are In My System (Polydor). From last year's imports comes this week's winner. Yes folks, it can be done — an electro-funk record that doesn't just crank the FX to overload but gathers its resources around a song and a pleading vocal to make a shrewd, stalking, sabre-toothed single.

There's a real joy and warmth about the percussion — with much volatile ricocheting in the soundscape (synthesiser pummels and pumps through a firing range where hi-hat slithers and spits), it's the rich beef-red real drums that provide cover — and the melody comes out fit and fortified, coaxed along by the singer's obsession and sense of ecstasy.

Although Robert Palmer's version is hovering on the outer reaches of the chart and looks set to have the hit, you ought to hear this: a record that grips the listener from its first sly accurate flurry to its final dying exhortation.

FAT LARRY'S BAND: Stubborn Kind Of Fella (Virgin). The drummer who ate the world and friends return with a languorous, looping '60s tribute. It sounds like an independent updated Drifters — finger-clicking, roving beat, clear falsetto and solid bass harmonies snuggle up together for an affectionate revitalisation. The singer is not at all intimidated by Marvin's original performance and clears enough space to allow his lean poise to hold its own. A clever, chirpy pop piece. Oh, yeah — the song's pretty good, too.

LUTHER VANDROSS: You're The Sweetest One (Epic). The Sultan Of Soulless Slop makes good shock! His albums could quite fairly be called 'Dross' as far as I'm concerned but this sparkling upbeat betrothal stands on its own with a conviction that towers above the bland mediocrity of the bulk (no pun etc) of his eponymous British LP release.

'You're The Sweetest One' is notable for its strong-minded, knuckle-tight rhythm track, sweet, crisp guitar fills and a fine integration of strings and female backing vocals. Vandross' talent undoubtedly lies in arranging; even though the lyrics are pure gush (there's a lot of it about, y'know), it doesn't matter as the vocal has a lovely resonance that adds to the overall pulsating texture. A masterly, medium-paced dance work out. I'm all for it.

JUNIOR: Communication Breakdown (Phonogram).

DAVID GRANT: Stop And Go (Chrysalis). Hell, I want to get behind Britfunkers as much as the next man, but for all the talk that's been going on these past three years there's been precious little evidence of a heartfelt and imaginative response to the music sired and groomed so splendidly by cross Atlantic counterparts.

So far Junior has recorded one fairly expendable album and about 50 different versions of 'Mama Used To Say'. We've all borne with him quite admirably, I think, and having made the allowances we await the moment — sadly, 'Communication Breakdown' isn't it. It opens with such a blatant rip-off of prime influence Stevie Wonder ('Masterblaster') that one wonders whether it's meant to be a very public in-joke until the rest of the song unfolds as a six minute non happening. The elaborate cut-ups and the careful mix don't add anything to the essence of the song, mainly because there's very little essence there in the first place. A big disappointment.

The former Linx vocalist fares better though Steve Levine's production (so well geared to the illustrious pop of Culture Club) is too fussy, drowning an admirable double and treble tracked vocal in a sub Gap Band buzz and thump. Despite that Grant has a masterful grasp of the song and a very fine melodic inflexion. But although he displays a good deal more cohesion than Mr Gisco, 'Stop And Go' is in itself no showstopper. These two gents may still be considered the leading lights in British soul music but for my money David Joseph's 'You Can't Hide Your Love' is a much better record than either of these.

HUMAN LEAGUE: (Keep Feeling) Fascination (Virgin). And now — another it'sy bitsy teeny weeny pop achievement. The Human League have become everything we expect and, more pertinently perhaps, all we demand from our pop bands — a glossy, attractive package that makes temporarily engaging records with a built-in obsolescence. The more I listen to this the more its, er, eclectic patchwork of various golden moments tears apart leaving spaces inbetween that are blank, unloved and unloveable. 'Fascination' has some of the comiest drivel masquerading as pop words this week, the opening chord sequence from 'The Crystals' 'And Then He Kissed Me' and a muted horn passage bearing fair resemblance to the one on Michael

Jackson and his fabulous brothers' 'Shake Your Body'.

So, they've got impeccable taste but beneath there's neither the zest, obsessiveness or magic that goes with being a major pop force. The boys will sing along with Phil's half sung/half spoken monotone and everyone will hum the girls' reply, but the formulae is wearing very thin. With this and 'Mirror Man' the League are closing in on themselves and playing very safe.

I remember much fanciful talk around the time of 'Dare' — how they wouldn't be pinned down, how the next LP might even be an all-acoustic set, how anything was possible. The horizon's narrowed a bit since the rush and mass

MAXIMUM JOY: Why Can't We Live Together (Garage). The Timmy Thomas original — one of the first chart records to utilise a rhythm box — held more appeal as a novelty than a landmark in soul music. However, it is one of those quirky singles ripe for refurbishing in this age where all things are electronic, programmable and prone to instantaneous mystification.

Maximum Joy play the song but it is producer Dennis Bovell (who also cops a vocal credit) who takes control of the whole affair. It's a rich mixture; satiated by gentle guitar tremors and muted trumpet passages. Bovell transcends any spurious 'dubwise' category and fashions a sound that suggests there are many dimensions to his talent still

the Heavy Metal tenement forecourt over the years?

Iron Maiden are a composite heavy metal group in that they have covered the entire waterfront of the genre's reactionary fantasy — they've covered Deep Purple speed kings, Page's satanic rites and now, with 'Icarus', they recede into the nether world fantasy for which they were always destined. Needless to say it's a stumbling pitiable lament, like a team of drunken roadies being told they've been barred from The Marquee for life.

THE BELLE STARS: Sweet Memory (Stiff). The girls get themselves a punky guitar riff, a double speed ska rhythm

seriously — the whole thing was done much better by his chum, J Walter Negro, madman of the apocalypse, two seasons back. The dolorous dragging backbeat from **The Clash** brings no levity or imagination to the affair either.

Rather than unleashing their own rapier wit and potent cackles these records leech on the spontaneity and instant heroics of New York's rap cult of the past few years. Phase 2 celebrate one of the major rap clubs in the city on their disc, it's as crummy an idea as it would have been for London or Chelsea to write a song about the London venue of the same name seven years ago.

Fab-5-Freddy is the one to hear. Coming in two halves (Yankee male side and French femme side) it works a treat, taking a salacious and lustful approach to the standard manoeuvres duly retrod elsewhere in this set. One side has a strange concoction of wise ripfire comic cut words and a musical backdrop laced with all kinds of surprises and fireworks jolting back and forth, always making the most interesting and suggestive connections on the way. And the other is a deep brood — the rhythm shuffling between eight string bass, the synthesiser and the drum machine — that rubber snaps and sly snatches all the way. More of this please.

On the other hand The Smurfs — Smurf is apparently the catchphrase to take over from E. T. on the New York dance circuit — is cheap, nasty and obvious gimmickry. A searing guitar hacks in and out of a functional backbeat. Its value outside of a monotonous club chant is negligible.

ICEHOUSE: Street Cafe (Chrysalis). The singer sounds like Bryan Ferry being taken on and off a medieval stretch rack — all dreamy and reflective until he starts being worried by a thousand guitars and then it's yelp, yelp and blunderbus a-go-go. Icehouse are one of those transparent rock conceptual bands with their feet in both camps — precious soft focus scenarios and ugly rifferama. Bleeding hearts and breast beating. I guess they "fill a need".

ROD: Just Keep On Walking (Creole). The tight, clipped rhythm making the opening entry is of the type honed to perfection by The All Platinum label in the mid '70s — but it's soon defiled in a tinny, irritating workout. Walk on by.

THE MILKSHAKES: Soldiers Of Love/Shimmy Shimmy (Upright). The Milkshakes have been doing steady business these last few years on the London and Hamburg club circuits with their unabashed trash revival, rooted in the early '60s beat boom. This is their seventh, or eighth single, I believe, and a faithful recreation of a time when music traded on the bare essentials of chord progressions and much muscle and elbow grease. However, the 'point' or the appeal for their retrograde diversion escapes me completely.

JERRY LEE LEWIS: My Fingers Do The Talkin' (MCA). In which the man who has spent the last 20 years in love with a bottle and/or bottle of pills professes the true light of his life to be the old Joanna. 'My Fingers Do The Talkin'', is no return to anything near what he was once capable of — a wretched sodden slab of rock-a-boogie pays service to a barely believable piece of self mythology.

Jerry Lee sounds positively sick, like a bloodhound waking up from a 20 year hangover. Terrible to think that he's probably going to spend the rest of his life earning his wages by living up to his own myth. Save your pennies for any of the old Sun collections or a copy of Nick Tosches' excellent *Hellfire* if you have any interest in this quarter.

T-CONNECTION: Love Odyssey (Capitol). Having recently been relieved of a sizeable chunk of my singles collection by the criminal classes it was with considerable delight

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Illustration Adams Peters

success back then. There's been a marriage, new plans laid and a future to be thought about. By the time Phil and Co got back into the studio, they had to make a buck like everybody else.

THOMPSON TWINS: We Are Detective (Arista). And when faced with the gammy, overwrought, underdone, unadulterated pap stewed together by the Thompson Twins, I'd be the last person to object to The Human League's conservatism. The TTs are everything the Human League aren't — asexual, bitter, grating, frozen solid. Where Oakey sets out to pattern a framework that is reliable and homespun, the TTs attempt to be the studios, expressive far-outs from the commune across the street.

Like so many in years gone by who were given to shouting "look at me and my art — over here! being different! dig that — if you can — you dummies!", they end up, on this record, in France. But even there they are pursued, watched day and night from shady doorways. That's right; more hollow suspense and blank mystery. Amidst the tangolike refrain there is all the usual ridiculous posturing — the phased, blaring voices (that guy that sings like he's just been told there's not enough in the kitty to pay for a new haircut gets me right here) and histrionic musical conceits hold court. Verily, the sound of true nausea.

LIONEL RICHIE: My Love (Motown). Hey, what do you call a rich, coloured balladeer with scabies — Lionel Itchy. This is the same old sincere, smug, slightly countrified ballad that Lionel and his relaxed, unremarkable voice have

unexplored.

He shouldn't be bothering with strictly smalltime stuff like 'Why Can't We Live Together' but be out there matching his charisma to a BIG talent (I imagine Marvin slipping into a long sloping groove, the voice of Boy George woven or spun to new heights, Frinstance). We could do with a megalomaniac producer or two right now. Get out and have a little, DB.

THE QUESTIONS: Price You Pay (Respond). Well, it's hardly the stuff that hit factories or seals of quality are built on. The Questions suffer from (a) an acute lack of direction (there are many strands woven here but few are tied together) and (b) a very wet, weedy white soul sound (the treble is shallow and shaky; the bass damp and splodgy). Plus points are an enthusiastic if somewhat overstated approach and a singer who can sweat and struggle without kicking up a hullabaloo or drowning in a sea of crocodile tears.

They need to relax a little, stand back and take stock of what lies between their aspirations and capabilities. Away from the glare of the spotlight and the pressure of growing up in public, there is much room for improvement.

IRON MAIDEN: Flight Of The Icarus (EMI). Pretentious? Not us, guv, this is the sound of youthful yearning, a good honest venting of frustrations, positive action.

Excuse me if I'm being a little objective but doesn't the interest of a group of East Enders in Greek mythology seem a little unnatural; doesn't it reek of conformity to the confines and expectations laid down in

jerk and they still sound like Madness with a lobotomy. Jenny lead Star really does have a very horrid female macho voice (if you know what I mean) and it comes over loud and clear on this sort of thing. The rest of the band seem to be singing "yap, yap" while she sings the chorus. Pretty apt really.

GRAND MIXER D ST AND THE INFINITY RAPPERS: Cuts It Up (Celluloid).

FUTURA 2000 WITH THE CLASH: The Escapades Of (Celluloid).

PHASE TWO: The Roxy (Celluloid).

FAB-5-FREDDY: To The Beat (Celluloid).

THE SMURFS: Smurf For What It's Worth (Celluloid). Rap died an ignominious death of sorts when Sugarhill released the Philippe Wynne 'America We Love You' insult. Save the genuine enticement of Fab-5-Freddy there is little in this batch of singles, licensed through Charly, to suggest that 'The Message' wasn't a pinnacle after which all else is expendable, repetitive, lame pastiche.

Grand Mixer D is the sort of a James Last for scratchers — all the riffs, all the tricks, everything but the kitchen sink battling it out to make an impression but cancelling each other out in the process. It sounds quite alarmingly subdued — no grit, no spite, none of the cunning sideswipes or lethal repercussions that should be there.

Futura's record is a plain bore "The idea is to let you know, That graffiti is here and it's on the go.... You got many young minds with something to say, All this space and the subway's grey." Fair enough but is it that important? The right to draw pictures in the tube! Futura's taking himself and his peer group far too