

The Pop Life

John Rockwell

A critic picks top 10 for '79

ONCE again, just in time for Christmas, comes this year's list of the 10 pop records that gave this writer the most pleasure — as opposed to whatever other kinds of recorded music might seem worthy in an absolute sense. Last year, for instance, Steve Reich's "Music for 18 Musicians" placed No. 3 on the list. Mr. Reich is a classical composer, but his disk was on the ECM jazz label and received some progressive-rock air play and promotion. This year, there was Philip Glass's "Einstein on the Beach." Mr. Glass has many things in common with Mr. Reich. But "Einstein" is a four-disk opera, and it simply can't count as a pop record. If it were included, then "Sweeney Todd" might have to be, too. And then there would be the new, three-act "Lulu" of Alban Berg, and all notions of category would collapse.

Just to keep things perfectly clear, then, what we're dealing with is new releases on domestic labels that actually came out in 1979. And we're not considering greatest-hits packages, even if they contain some studio-recorded material.

Here, then, is the top-10 pop-album list for 1979:

1. "The Roches." The debut album of the Roches, the avant-garde, folkish female trio, exquisitely produced by Robert Fripp, had its coy moments. But it stayed on this writer's turntable longer than any other album, and gave the deepest and richest pleasure of the year. It was also the scariest record, because the Roches probe emotions and even fears that most pop — most art, even — does not approach.

2. Neil Young, "Rust Never Sleeps." There are some throwaway cuts on this album. But the best songs are among the finest of Neil Young's career, and hence in the history of folk and rock. And nobody made a nobler effort to define what rock-and-roll meant in the late 1970's than Mr. Young.

3. Talking Heads, "Fear of Music." Another masterly blend of paranoid intellection, avant-garde experimentation and irresistible dance music, all played with real passion by Talking Heads and produced with the sensitivity and ingenuity of Brian Eno at his best.

4. Donna Summer, "Bad Girls." This was Donna Summer's year, commercially speaking, and the two disks of "Bad Girl" — a rather soppy side of ballads notwithstanding — were simultaneously the acme of disco and the

most tangible sign yet of its fusion with rock and the mainstream. It also gave further evidence of Giorgio Moroder's skills as a composer and producer.

5. "The B-52's." Kooky and quirky, and we'll have to see how the B-52's develop. But as a one-shot dance record, this album was as charming as the year could offer.

6. Linton Kwesi Johnson, "Forces of Victory." The sleeper of the year, a brooding yet remarkably accessible disk of progressive reggae instrumentals and half-singing, half-chanting revolutionary poetry by Linton Kwesi Johnson, a Londoner of West Indian descent.

7. Chic, "Risqué." Sure, it's a formula. But Chic remains the purveyor of about the most elegant, danceable disco music around. Chic, in short.

8. Rosanne Cash, "Right or Wrong." An elegantly crafted example of latter-day Los Angeles country-rock from Rosanne Cash, daughter of Johnny Cash and wife of Rodney Crowell, Emmylou Harris's longtime associate. This year's best neo-Linda Ronstadt record, in the absence of Miss Ronstadt herself.

9. Joe Jackson, "Look Sharp!" Power pop at its refreshing best. Perhaps Elvis Costello, Graham Parker and the Clash are more earnest, or even important. But Joe Jackson and the Police are more fun.

10. Leonard Cohen, "Recent Songs." Every charge of lugubriousness and self-pity that can be leveled at Leonard

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The Roches: their album "gave the deepest and richest pleasure of the year"

Cohen is true. Yet he still composes deeply evocative love songs, and this time around they've been given a lovely setting by the production of Henry Lewy.

Beyond these, there were runner-up disks that might have made the top 10, listed here in no particular order: Brian Eno's "Music for Airports"; Pink Floyd, "The Wall"; Elvis Costello, "Armed Forces"; Lou Reed, "The Bells"; Ian Dury, "Do It Yourself"; Blondie, "Eat to the Beat"; Karla Bonoff, "Restless Nights"; Randy Newman, "Born Again"; "The Knack"; Fleetwood Mac, "Tusk"; Angela Bofill, "Angel of the Night"; James White and the Blacks, "Off White"; the Police, "Reggatta de Blanc"; Marianne Faithfull, "Broken English," and Mi-

chael Jackson, "Off the Wall."

In addition, here is our annual consideration of last year's top 10 artists and a follow-up report on what happened to them this year. The No. 1 of 1978, Talking Heads, produced a 1979 album of comparable quality, but placed only No. 3 this year — although it should be said that Nos. 1, 2 and 3 on this year's list finished in practically a dead heat. The Rolling Stones, No. 2 in 1978, didn't release a record in 1979, nor did Steve Reich, who was No. 3. Neil Young, No. 4, is No. 2 this year. Ian Dury, No. 5, and Blondie, No. 8, are runners-up, although their disks were again fine; after a slow start, 1979 proved a strong year. Nos. 6 and 7 and 9 and 10 in 1978 all had no disks in 1979: Bruce Springsteen, Linda Ronstadt, Wendy Waldman and Warren Zevon.