

1992's Crop of Music Below Par

October 13

Shon McHugh pleads not guilty to a grand jury's charge of murder at his arraignment in Middlesex Superior Court. He is held without bail.

October 13

The three main candidates for vice president spar in a debate marked by strong rhetoric.

October 14

Joseph D. Donovan and **Alfredo Velez** are arraigned in Middlesex Superior Court and held without bail. Both plead not guilty to charges of murder and armed robbery.

October 14

Three people, two of them students, are robbed at gunpoint near the Nuclear Reactor Laboratory.

October 19

Ann F. Friedlaender PhD '64, a noted economist and the first female dean at MIT, dies at the age of 54 after battling cancer for several years.

October 20

Trial hearings begin in a sexual harassment suit filed by **Marina R. Erukar SM '92** against Professor of Management **Gabriel R. Bitran** and MIT. In the suit, Erukar claims that Bitran kissed her against her will several times and that MIT is responsible for his actions and for failing to properly handle an internal complaint she made.

October 21

"Success and/or Honesty: In Here, Out There," an institute colloquium on academic honesty, receives mixed reviews. Students describe the panelists as "too far removed" and the discussion as "unfocused."

October 22

The MIT Safety Office rules that the cause of the fire that destroyed **New House Room 507** can not be determined.

October 24

The Class of 1993 triumphs in the Battle of the Classes for the second consecutive year.

October 25

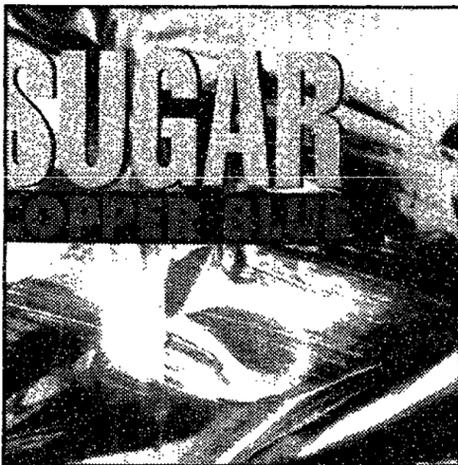
A female MIT student is assaulted on Memorial Drive near **Killian Court**. She strikes her attacker and escapes unharmed.

By Deborah A. Levinson

Usually, I spend a lot of money on music. In 1992, however, I didn't buy much — something I attribute not just to my financially draining purchase of a CD player, but also to the dearth of really worthwhile music last year. REM came out with *Automatic for the People*, which was good enough to make up for *Out of Time*, but not good enough to buy. Sinéad O'Connor's *Am I Not Your Girl?* consisted of little more than perfunctory readings of old standards (and a pitiful version of a pitiful song, "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina"). WFNX persisted in playing mindless, soulless dance music from one-hit wonders when they might have sold that same air time to something more interesting, say, more ads for skiing resorts.

That doesn't mean that there wasn't anything worth listening to last year. Following is a list of my seven favorites, starting with what I consider the two best recordings from male and female vocalists.

Sugar — *Copper Blue*. Sometimes you can tell how good an album is by how much it annoys the guy in the next office. If laying out 1,000 pages of an automobile shop manual didn't drive this guy



nuts, the fact that I spent many an afternoon playing "Helpless" and "Hoover Dam" over and over through the thin plaster walls surely did.

I couldn't help it, though. *Copper Blue* is so good that I played it almost every day for a period of about two months. I'm still not tired of it; in fact, I can hardly wait for Sugar's next release, due out sometime in March. Since I was a big fan of Hüsker Dü, the band Sugar-singer Bob Mould led before starting a solo career, I was expecting to like Sugar a lot. I will frankly admit that occasionally on *Copper Blue* (and especially in concert), Sugar sounds like a low-rent Hüsker Dü — but my attitude is that a little Hüsker is better than none at all.

From the ferocious chords of "The Act We Act," to the Byrds-y jangling guitars of "If I Can't Change Your Mind," *Copper Blue* never lets up. Mould has always been a loud but melodic guitarist in a way Metallica can only dream about imitating, and Sugar's range of fast and slow songs allows him to merge the vastly different sounds he achieved on solo albums *Workbook* and *Black Sheets of Rain*.

As if Sugar's music weren't enough to like, there's also Mould's lyrics, as in this passage from "Hoover Dam":

*Standing on the edge
Of the Hoover Dam
I'm on the centerline
Right between two states of mind
And if the wind from the traffic
Should blow me away*

*From this altitude
It will come back to you
And do you know the time
All that's left of me is slight insanity
What's on the right I don't know*

After weathering Mould's soul-cleansing on his two solo albums, it's satisfying to hear him in a band again, producing music that isn't about the breakup of Hüsker Dü. With Sugar, he has an ensemble that pays homage to his old group, but maintains a sound that, with time, will be all its own.

k.d. lang — *Ingénue*. I must confess that I had never heard K.D. Lang before the song she covered for *Red, Hot + Blue*, and it was not until some friends played *Ingénue* for me that I considered buying any of Lang's work. Now, after repeated listenings to the CD, I am willing to call it one of my two favorite recordings of 1992.

Ingénue marks a departure from Lang's country roots, but she is as adept with the torch songs on this CD as she is with any of the country songs



I have heard her sing. Listen to "The Mind of Love," where muted guitar and strings sway like island palms, and Lang croons about a self-destructive love affair, "Surely help will arrive soon / and cure these self-induced wounds / Why hurt yourself, Kathryn?" There's also the jaunty, coy "Miss Chatelaine" — "Just a kiss / just a kiss / I have lived just for this / I can't explain why I've become / Miss Chatelaine."

Lang's strongest suit, however, is her sweet, smoky voice. She can wrap her voice around a song and draw the subtlest emotions from it, seemingly without effort. I would be happy listening to her sing nursery rhymes.

Even if you think you'll miss Lang's quirky country music, if you're as much in love with her incredible voice as I am, you'll need to buy *Ingénue*.

Other notable recordings of 1992, in no particular order:

The Cavedogs — *Soul Martini*. The only way *Soul Martini* wouldn't have made it onto this list is if the Cavedogs had omitted "Boy in a Plastic Bubble," clearly one of the best singles of the year. It has swirling guitars, a driving drum beat, and paranoid lyrics like "I'm happy living like a boy in a plastic bubble / No one to wake me from the dead / I close the hatch on what I only guess is trouble / and pull the sheets above my head." The first time I heard it, I couldn't believe how good it was.

The Cavedogs, like Marshall Crenshaw, are masters of the pure pop song, relying on clever lyrics and killer hooks. This gives them a singular niche in the relentlessly "alternative" Boston rock scene — you'll never confuse the Cavedogs with O-Positive or Tribe. They also have a singular way with song titles and subjects, like "Tarzan and His Arrowheads," "Love Grenade," and "Boy in the Plastic Bubble," the latter inspired by the John Travolta movie.

Peter Gabriel — *Us*. I never thought that Peter Gabriel could produce an album of the caliber of 1984's *So*. *Us*, however, is that album. More emotionally rich than *So*, it has the same lyrical complexity and musical intensity that are Gabriel's signature.

Many of *Us*'s songs are drawn from Gabriel's experiences in group therapy, which he participated in after his divorce, and later, his breakup with Rosanna Arquette. "Digging in the Dirt," the first single, is specifically about psychotherapy: "I'm digging in the dirt / To find the places I got hurt." Other songs explore closed-off romantic relationships ("Come Talk to Me") or emotional neediness ("Love to be Loved" and "Kiss that Frog").

As in *So*, where a dance song ("Sledgehammer") and a slow love song ("In Your Eyes") were the standouts, on *Us*, there's "Steam," a lusty tune in the spirit of "Sledgehammer," right down to the same thinly veiled sexual innuendo, and the remarkably beautiful "Blood of Eden." Sinéad O'Connor provides breathy backup vocals on "Blood of Eden," and her wispy, little-girl voice meshes perfectly with Gabriel's throaty rasp.

Us's only drawback is that it is so personal that one almost feels like an eavesdropper. Still, it is this rawness that distinguishes it from Gabriel's other work, and quite possibly makes it his finest effort.

L7 — *Bricks are Heavy*. At last — a women's thrash-metal group! There's only so many times I can listen to men screaming about how wonderful it is to mistreat their girlfriends before I get disgusted and turn off MTV (one of the primary reasons I stopped watching it at all). L7 is the antidote to the misogynist metalheads — they're four women unashamed of being powerful, sexual creatures, and they don't sound willing to put up with anything.

Bricks are Heavy is not for the faint of heart: the guitars are very, very loud and fast, the drum beats driving, the bass pounding, the lyrics

scathing. "Diet Pill" recounts the frustration of the average housewife, with L7 snarling, "The diet pill is wearing off ... Calgon can't take me away." These women scream about how there's always "one more thing that I can't take / one more thing and I'm gonna break" in "One More Thing" and growl "You bring out the monster in me" in "Monster." They're never afraid to ask for what they want. Many women are going to find *Bricks are Heavy* a liberating album, in more ways than one.

XTC — *Nonsuch*. I have been an XTC fan since a friend and I discovered *Go 2*, the band's undistinguished second album, with its enticing, self-referential cover design. I've followed the band's career through flings with 1960s psychedelia as the Dukes of Stratosphear, to *Skylarking*'s *Sgt. Pepper* feel, and now to *Nonsuch*.

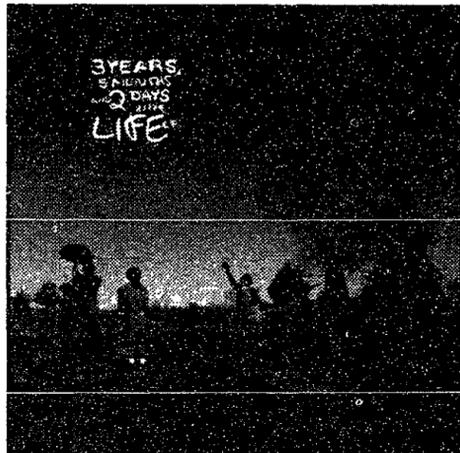
XTC started out as four nervous, edgy new-wavers and over time, has evolved into a trio that pays more homage to the Beatles than to Bauhaus. *Nonsuch* delivers 17 songs of shimmering pop that belie the often-biting political lyrics. Colin Moulding's "The Smartest Monkeys" sounds like a relatively standard pop song until you listen to the words:

*Well man created the cardboard box
to sleep in it
And man converted the newspaper
to a blanket
Well you have to admit that he's
come a long way
Since swinging about in the trees.*

Likewise with Andy Partridge's "Books are Burning" — "Books are burning / In the still air / And you know where they burn books / People are next," and his song about politicians, "Ugly Underneath."

Softer, more pastoral songs like "Humble Daisy," "My Bird Performs," and "Holly up on Poppy," balance the political ones. There's a certain formal elegance to *Nonsuch*, evinced in the cover art, a map of Surrey, England in 1611, and in the type, a Caslon with wobbly, uneven letters designed to look like hand-set type. This gracefulness lulls the listener, making *Nonsuch* sound harmless, when in fact it's XTC's most political album — and its best since *Skylarking*.

Arrested Development — *3 Years, 5 Months & 2 Days in the Life of...* Generally, I don't like rap music. I remember listening to Run-DMC in



high school, and I like Neneh Cherry ... but the last CD I expected to purchase this year was Arrested Development's debut — not just because it's mostly rap music, but because MTV loved it. Then I heard "Tennessee" while driving in a friend's car and realized that Arrested Development is anything but the typical MTV bubble-gum rap group. After seeing AD's astonishing performance on "Saturday Night Live" — probably one of the three or four best performances on SNL in the past few years — I bought *3 Years, 5 Months & 2 Days in the Life of...*

Arrested Development reminds me most of vintage Sly and the Family Stone, and AD acknowledges its debt to Sly Stone with "People Everyday," an updating of "Everyday People." Its music mixes rap, R&B, spirituality, and Afrocentrism, blending to yield a positive message — a refreshing change from Ice Cube's bleak vision of street life.

Specch, AD's singer/songwriter, brings a wry sense of humor to the songs, as in "Dawn of the Dreads" where he claims he's too short to attract the average woman, but that he'll "patiently wait for someone I can reach." His lyrics can also be gentle and beautiful, even in the same song: "Many sisters don't understand my style, I live my life in an outcast tribe / A tribe that strives to see a brighter day, I foresee that I'll / Walk with closed eyes ... until dawn. / Dawn of the Dreads."