

FILM

Look up, it's Superdemocrat!

By Pat Aufderheide

After all that hype, you're willing to stand in line to see *Superman*, but with your sneer handy. In no time, though, you're won over. It's not good, but it is fun, funny, and above all safe. This movie will not embarrass you in front of your kid or your mother-in-law.

It may embarrass you just a touch later on, because in retrospect the film—made pretty much by committee and co-ordinated by Richard Donner—is technically ordinary. It's archconservative in its storytelling style; the technical effects are pretty but not innovative; no real suspense pitches you into the popcorn; and Superman flies around with his hands clenched, obviously holding on to something. But somehow the movie makes you feel reassured and nostalgic for a world that never was.

The story is a neatly framed comic book episode. Superman's father (Marlon Brando) sends him to Earth when Krypton blows up, the boy (Christopher Reeve) comes to live with Ma and Pa Kent (Phyllis Baxter, Glenn Ford) and then goes to work as newspaperman Clark Kent. Superman rescues Lois Lane (Margot Kidder) from falling off a tall building, then goes on to stop diabolical Lex Luthor (Gene Hackman) from dropping western California into the ocean.

Kid's story, adult chuckle.

A kid's story, right? Yeah, but

we were mostly adults in the audience when I went, cheering on the good guys. Superman works both for kids and adults, because it tells a kid's story with an adult chuckle. The script (Mario Puzo had a heavy hand in it) carefully avoids any whiff of city sophistication about the mom-flag-apple pie elements of the legend, but it pokes fun at itself in a different way—with body humor, broad jokes and puns: Perry White caps a series of questions about the superhero, "And where did he get that suit?" Lex Luthor claims disarmingly, "We all have our faults—mine's in California." The movie's tone is like that of a sincere, honest guy who can take a well-meant joke.

But the real comfort in watching this movie antedates the movie version and lies in the Superman legend, drawn preternaturally well by two Jewish high school boys in Cleveland as Hitler came to power, and made popular on the eve of World War II. (See sidebar.)

The Superman story casts an eternal protective cloak over our daily arrangements. *Superman* seems like a partial fantasy, about a nice guy with special powers in a slightly neater version of our small towns and cities. But it's a fantasy of whole cloth, featuring that all-American dream, a world without history.

The movie brings this out at least as clearly as any comic book ever did, putting "the American Way" outside history and human error, comforting us with abso-

lutes. It does so with, among other things, the absolutely good character of Superman, the absolutely bad character of his enemies, and even with his eternally incomplete love life.

Superdemocrat.

Superman is a superdemocrat. He explains early on to Lois, "I'm here to fight for truth, justice and the American Way," and he leaves us at the end carolling, "We're all part of the same team!" But he's a superdemocrat by religion, not by choice. The movie establishes this from the start, with Superman's own dad.

We see him abide by a wrong council decision (to stay on Krypton), dying rather than flouting majority rule. Brando takes on the heavy mantle of democratic responsibility with unparalleled pomposity; but he's even better when he poses as God the Father, years later when his son is watching a recording of him. The father claims that because of human beings' capacity for growth, he has given them... (up music)...his only Son.

So the son of God comes to the *Daily Planet* both egalitarian and superior, employing his special powers to protect a system that denies special powers to particular people and groups. He sides with democracy because Dad said so. He draws no strength from the democratic process. There is no interaction—no, it's just give, give, give for Superman. He preserves "the American Way" in the sense of pickling it. He rescues us from the need to use the decision-making process he defends.

No social ills.

But then the kinds of decisions that need to get made with it are written out of the picture. All the action in Metropolis takes place between exotic bad guys and the superhero. Our well-ordered lives are disturbed only by the sick schemes of genius, or by natural disaster. Superman fights Evil, and rescues damsels and children from disaster, but he never has to fight anything endemic in society (nor, the movie promises, do we).

This works better in the comics, by the way, than it does in the movie. It's easy, with real people to look at, to begin to wonder why Lois is so special and just what Superman does about nations full of starving children or racial tension. Still, the movie manages to keep real life at a tolerable distance, in part because each film character gets only one gimmick, one identification. We never have to wonder if they would behave differently or what would happen in different combinations of characters. Everything is fixed, even the smiles.

Finally, Superman freezes time with the relationship between Clark, Lois and Superman. He loves her, she spurns him and loves him, who spurns her. A tidy solution: endless love interest with no messy consequences. (What will happen in *Superman II*, already filmed, when Superman and Lois Lane actually make love?)

No wonder *Superman's* so much fun to watch. Besides the goofy effects and the thrill of staring at Christopher Reeve in stretchy underwear, we get a celebration of social harmony without the work and mess involved in social change.

A bird? A plane? No, a nice boy from Cleveland

Superman is from Krypton, right? Wrong. It's Cleveland.

And he's Jewish. At least his creators, high school chums Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster are.

Back in the hard times of the early '30s, Siegel and Shuster were still in high school. Siegel was putting out the school's weekly *Glenville Torch*. Shuster was learning how to draw. Their friend, mild-mannered Wilson Hirschfeld, would practice his newspaper style in the *Torch* office, and lovely but "stuck-up" Lois Amster stayed on the edge of the writer's group.

In Germany, Adolf Hitler was learning to wow the crowds.

Later, Siegel told the *Saturday Evening Post* that the story of Superman came to him in a blinding flash as he lay sleepless on a warm night in 1932. (This description fit with Siegel's prose style, learned by devouring Edgar Rice Burroughs, gothic chillers, and comics like Buck Rogers.) Then he turned to Shuster to draw the Man of Steel. It took six years for a publisher to give the strip a trial run. But by 1940 Superman was flying over radiowaves, and a year later there were more than a dozen imitations.

Like other comic heroes of the day, Superman went to war, battling Nazis on land and in the air. Years earlier, the *Glenville Torch* had cited, under the head "Impossible to See," "Jerry Siegel and Adolf Hitler indulging in a wild game of pin-ochle."

Equally impossible would be Super money for Siegel and



Siegel and Shuster's original Superman.

Shuster. After years of rejections, the two had signed away their publication rights for \$130 in 1938. After Superman became a hit, publisher Harry Donenfeld agreed to let them do a regular strip for the McClure Syndicate for 50 percent of the net if they would work exclusively for Donenfeld for the next ten years at \$35 per page. Or they could be replaced.

From 1940 to 1941, Superman, Inc., made about \$1.5 million in comic sales as well as Superman toys and other products. Siegel and Shuster split about \$150,000 between themselves and a staff of five artists working in a one-room office in Cleveland. After their contract with Donenfeld ran out in 1948, they obtained \$100,000 in a legal settlement and were fired.

This story was based on an article by Dennis Dooley in *Cleveland Magazine*.

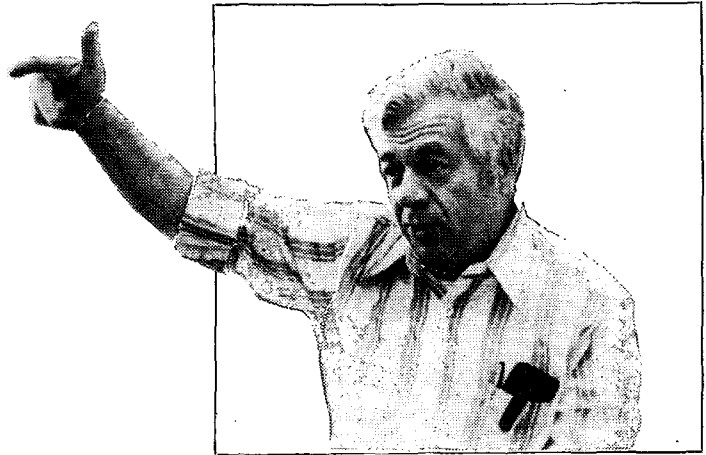
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Short Notice



Tanya Tucker: inconsistent image

Records

BABYLON BY BUS

Bob Marley & the Wailers
(Island Records)

A live album usually means a performer is biding his or her time, having trouble writing new material, or meeting the record company's demands for "product." But this two-record set might be worth it for Marley fans. Recorded during last year's European tour, Marley and the Wailers sound terrific as they do songs spanning the '70s. After the disappointment of *Kaya*, his last studio album, it's a pleasure hearing Marley sound as if he means it. **bd**

PRONTO MONTA

Kate and Anna McGarrigle
(Warner Bros.)

An album with all the wit and lyricism we've come to expect from these two sisters out of Quebec. It's all gorgeous and impeccable—particularly the title cut, a French folk song—but surprisingly unaffected. **bd**

MOVE IT ON OVER

George Thorogood and the Destroyers (Rounder Records)
Ideal wake-up music, assuming you don't have landlord or neighbor troubles. Fine "Rockin' Rhythm'n'Blues," even better than his debut album last year. Now if only George could write his own stuff... **bd**

SHAKEDOWN STREET

Grateful Dead (Arista Records)

Of interest to zealous Dead Heads but I'm not sure who else. The Dead are erratic. Whenever Jerry Garcia is singing or playing guitar they have a distinctive, often joyful sound. But when either Bob Weir or Donna Godchaux are up front, they turn into a run-of-the-mill rock band. Spotty song-writing also contributes to this being a very mixed album. **bd**

TNT

Tanya Tucker (MCA)

Tanya Tucker, the country prodigy who hit big at age 13 with "Delta Dawn," is now 20. On this album for the cross-over market sex is the ticket. On the cover Tanya straddles a microphone cord. On the inside, Tanya poses in an outfit that seems spray-painted on her. The record itself is inconsistent: her "Not Fade Away" and "Angel from Montgomery" are great; her "Heartbreak Hotel" and "Brown-Eyed Handsome Man" are not quite as good, and the ballads are undistinguished. Maybe next time she won't need to dress up her music so cheaply. **cw**

HOW I SPENT MY VACATION

Mitch Ryder (Seeds & Stems)

What he did in six years of inactivity goes unanswered on this, his first recording since 1972. Only the eight-minute "Poster" addresses the decline of his first career. Apart from forays into jazz, this LP rocks in the Motor City tradition. With a new band and a matured voice that befits the drama of the lyrics, the "Sock

It To Me" man has produced an album far more satisfying and less complacent than those by many of rock's young turks. **cb**

AMERICAN STRANGER

Happy Traum (Kicking Mule)

Solid folk-with-old-timey-and-bluegrass influence record by an old favorite. Traum gives a contemporary feeling to the title cut (aka "The Plains of Amerikee") and blends into a lively version of "The Eighth of January" (aka "The Battle of New Orleans"). With John Sebastian on harmonica, he gives new life to Leadbelly's traditional "When I Was A Cowboy," a bit of a tribute to that great black singer. And in a surprisingly well done interpretation of Dylan's "Buckets of Rain," Traum proves that a lively upbeat song can have a mellow sound without being obnoxious. This album has to be listened to more than once to be appreciated. **es**

ICE PICKIN'

Albert Collins (Alligator)

This Houston-cum-L.A. blues guitarist is given his best shot in nearly a decade. Collins' near-legendary "Cool Sound" is the product of short, declarative electric guitar blasts, flanked by a funky ensemble that includes Chicago saxophonist A.C. Reed. Material ranges from satirical and topical ("Master Charge") to dramatic and domestic ("Conversation With Collins"). With



Albert Collins: "Cool Sound"

artists like Collins at the helm, blues is assured its say in the '80s. **cb**

AIR ABOVE MOUNTAINS (BUILDINGS WITHIN)

Cecil Taylor (Inner City)

More solo piano masterpieces from "the Ellington of the avant-garde," or the private musical exorcisms of personal demons? New listeners, unable to penetrate the multilayers of atonality and dissonance, might dismiss this record as the latter. But the intense and patient attention required is often rewarded. **dr**

CHARACTERS

John Abercrombie (ECM)

Beautiful impressionistic sketches from a deft and sensitive guitarist. Still within the "new cool" favored by ECM, Abercrombie avoids icy one-dimensionality through creative overdubbing of



Cecil Taylor: exorcising demons?

acoustic and electric guitar parts, adding painterly strokes of tonal color and warmth to his almost too fragile compositions. **dr**

EUROPEAN IMPRESSIONS

Larry Coryell (Arista-Novus)

Guitarist Coryell has gone completely acoustic lately but has not abandoned his machine-gun approach. His dexterous flash, powerful chords and sizzling single-note runs are sure to please guitar speed freaks, but this solo record lacks the discipline and diversity of Coryell's recent guitar duets with Philip Catherine. **dr**

THE LEE KONITZ QUINTET (Chiaroscuro)

This loose, free-wheeling session waxes from cool to hot as befits the leader's career (from bebop, through '50s cool to recent solo and duet experiments). Supported by a crisp and energetic rhythm section, Konitz is joined and

often challenged by fellow alto saxophonist Bob Mover in intricate harmonizing counterpoints and invigorating solo exchanges. **dr**

LOVE ON THE SUDAN

Billy Harper Quintet (Denon Jazz import)

Applying Coltrane-like "sheets of sound" solos to his own haunting modal compositions, Billy Harper stands at the cutting edge of reviving driving, rhythmic jazz known as "hard bop." His quintet recordings, as well as his regular work in the Max Roach Quartet show him the most original and formidable of the young post-Trane tenor players: That neither he nor Roach has a U.S. record contract is a disgrace. **dr**

MOZART SYMPHONIES

H. von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic (Deutsche Grammophon)

Prepare to celebrate Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's 222nd birthday on January 27 with Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. This richly boxed set of three records provides seven of Mozart's symphonies, Nos. 32, 35, 36 and 38-41, including the famous "Haffner," "Linz," "Prague" and "Jupiter" symphonies. This is one of the finest of the available Mozart sets. At its best, the music is magically airborne; lines float gently and gracefully, with both simplicity and inevitability. Karajan's minuet movements tend to be slow and proud (levity and humor are not this conductor's strong points), and, in contrast, his presto finales go like the wind, challenging the listener to keep abreast. Everything about these performances is absolutely assured, including the rather unfortunately grandiose opening of the D-Major "Haffner." **km**

BRUCKNER'S FOURTH SYMPHONY

Kurt Mazur and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (Vanguard)

Few orchestras in the world can compete with the one from the legendary Gewandhaus, and Mazur's classically elegant interpretation makes Bruckner's Fourth Symphony, the "Romantic" (in its original version) sing with beauty.

Contributors: Bruce Dancis, Carlo Wolff, Cary Baker, Ed Schoenfeld, Derk Richardson, Karen Monson.

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by Alan Greene. Single copy 60¢. Subscription \$7.50 yearly, U.S.A. Jewish Currents, Dept. T, 22 East 17th St., N.Y.C. 10003. Pamphlet by Schappes "Irving Howe's 'The World of Our Fathers' A Critical Analysis," send 60¢. Special—A TEN YEAR HARVEST, Third Jewish Currents Reader, 1966-1976, 300 pp., paperback, \$3.75.

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There were probably more good to excellent rock albums in 1978 than at any other time in this decade, even though the year was not filled with startling new developments.

For the first time New Wave music began reaching a mass American audience, as was seen with the commercial successes of Patti Smith and Elvis Costello. And such ancients as the Rolling Stones, the Kinks, and the Who brought out strong albums, showing that they were neither too old nor "in the way," as had been charged by some of the young rock rebels.

1977's most popular groups—Fleetwood Mac and the Eagles—both abdicated, neither releasing a new album this year. In their place came an enterprising multi-media mogul, Robert Stigwood, who successfully packaged dubiously artistic sound-track albums of popular movies like *Saturday Night Fever*, *Grease*, and *Sergeant Pepper*.

In reggae music, the trend was toward greater sophistication in both production techniques and the addition of musical elements from rock, jazz, and soul. Roots reggae is still being played in Jamaica, but it isn't getting released in the U.S. As a result, *Two Sevens Clash* by Culture, perhaps the best reggae album I've heard all year, is available only as an import in this country.

Business was worse than usual from the consumer standpoint. At the end of the year list prices for some records reached an outrageous \$8.93, the second \$1.00 price rise in about a year. Fans were given the "opportunity" to plunk down as much as \$16.00 for colored records, featuring photographs or other art work instead of the ordinary black vinyl. Journalistic independence reached a new low when *Rolling Stone* magazine publisher Jann Wenner publicly chastised his own critics for telling the truth about a putrid Bob Dylan album and a mediocre Rolling Stones concert. Lastly, despite strong sales by peripheral punks like Elvis Costello, timid American record companies continued to be slow releasing albums and 45s by most British New Wave bands.

A few words about the critical criteria used for the following 1978 Ten-Best list. These, in no particular order, are my favorite rock and reggae albums, the ones I enjoy the most; they are not necessarily the most innovative records, or the ones featuring the greatest musicians. Some excellent bands have yet to capture the brilliance of their live performances on records—and they don't show up in the top ten. Imports were excluded, as were live albums made up largely of songs released in previous years.

Elvis Costello: his year to be pissed off and paid for it.



Bruce Dancis'

10 BEST 1978 ROCK N' REGGAE

Finally, I have had to invoke the *Patti Smith Rule* on occasion. The rule applies to generally excellent albums, where it isn't simply a matter of just *not playing* the record. The Smith rule calls for severe penalties against an album if it featured any song that was so excruciatingly awful that I had to get up to skip over the accursed track every time the record was playing. As a result, even "Because the Night" on Patti Smith's *Easter* can't make up for "Bab-e-logue."

Misfits

The Kinks

Arista

Wonderfully funny, challenging, and reflective music by one of the all-time great bands. Ray Davies has been a marvelously iconoclastic thinker for well over a decade, and this has never been clearer than on "A Rock'n'Roll Fantasy."

This Year's Model

Elvis Costello
Columbia

The combination of Costello's vengeful lyrics and a sparse instrumental backing with his punky Buddy Holly appearance and pissed-off demeanor created its own sub-genre—outcast rock. This is an angry album by perhaps the most lyrical New Wave rocker.

Haile I Hymn (Chapter 1)

I Jah Man
Mango

An ironic mixture of very modern, rock-influenced reggae with a fervent, all-consuming, religious testament. I Jah Man's daring debut features four lengthy cuts, backed by some of Jamaica's finest musicians.

Road to Ruin

The Ramones

Sire

The best album to date by America's foremost New Wave



The Clash breaks into the second team.

band. The pace has been slowed down a bit, so it's a little more accessible than previous albums, but the Ramones never stray too far from a splendid minimalism.

Hearts of Stone

Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes

Epic

Stunning melodies, the best and most complementary horn section in rock since the Mar-Keys, and Southside Johnny Lyon's strong, clear voice make a near-perfect expression of pure rock and R&B.

Bloody Tourists

10 CC

Polydor

A British band so impeccably polished in its arrangements, harmonies, and production that it is often knocked as being "too commercial." What's wrong with being commercial, if you're good?

Some Girls

The Rolling Stones
Rolling Stones

As long as Mick Jagger is in the band, the Stones will probably flirt with decadence and sexism. As long as Keith Richards is around, they will more than likely be a great rock band.

Dire Straits

Dire Straits
Warner Bros.

Positive proof that blues-rock isn't solely in the hands of tasteless show-offs. Mark Knopfler's strong guitar work and brutally honest stories of urban life make this the year's finest debut album.

BECAUSE OF THE HIGH level of rock music this year, the following honorable mention list is more than merely perfunctory. In most previous years during the '70s, almost any one of these albums could have made a Ten-Best list.

Give 'em Enough Rope

The Clash

Epic

More Songs About Buildings and Food
Talking Heads

Sire

Who Are You

The Who

MCA

Darkness on the Edge of Town

Bruce Springsteen
Columbia

Q: Are We Not Men?

A: We Are Devo

Devo

Warner Bros.

The Bride Stripped Bare

Bryan Ferry

Atlantic

Stranger in Town

Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet Band

Capitol



Bob Seger: close but no cigar.

Heaven Tonight

Cheap Trick

Epic

Wavelength

Van Morrison

Warner Bros.

Lastly, here are a few awards for some of the worst albums of the year. Obvious losers aren't even considered—these are for albums that aimed high and hit bottom.

Sophomore slump award—*Return to Magenta*, Mink DeVille (Capitol).

Too much weed award—*Kaya*, Bob Marley and the Wailers (Island).

Most unnecessary comeback award—*Reunion*, Peter, Paul & Mary (Warner Bros.).

Garbage is garbage even if it comes out of his can award—*Street Legal*, Bob Dylan (Columbia).

CULTURE SHOCK

SO THERE

Dusan Makavejev, whose native Yugoslavia has censored his quixotic films, *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* and *Sweet Movie*, reported at a

Spanish film festival two weeks ago that Yugoslavia is "100 percent Marxist—50 percent Karl, 50 percent Groucho."

UH HUH

Head of the Italian

film firm producing *The Guyana Massacre* assured reporters last week, "You can be sure of one thing... we're not in it just for exploitation."

SO RELAX AND ENJOY IT



Esquire titled its December cover feature, "The Year of the Lusty Woman: It's All Right to be a Sex Object Again."