

I woke up this morning  
Bent on destruction  
In my ivory tower  
On the sunny side of the street  
I'm the last jet pilot  
With twenty-twenty vision  
And mind bending power  
On a mission from God  
—The Screaming Blue Messiahs  
"Four Engines Burning  
(Over the U.S.A.)"

By Mark G. Judge

ACCORDING TO A RECENT MAC-Neil-Lehrer NewsHour, pop music Armageddon has arrived. Ten years after the Clash declared "Armageddon Time" MacNeil's "essayist" Penny Stallings' oddly bemused report noted the "bleakness" pervasive in pop these

## MUSIC

days. I guess Jim and Robin were feeling a touch arthritic and decided to send a correspondent to the rock'n'roll trenches, even if only to mouth dispatches from the Office of Propaganda. And what's the news from the front?

Well, if Stallings' essay proved anything, it's that her radio is jammed on the top 40. With the exception of Neil Young, the post-punk artists she chose to emphasize her misinformed point—we'll call them the Four Horsemen—are without exceptions paragons of the kind of sonorous, heavy-marketing, high-school-reunion-theme drivel that the late Lester Bangs once referred to as "air spray." The list reads like the CD collection at a Georgetown cocktail party for the Young Americans for Freedom: Billy Joel, Don Henley, Tracy Chapman and Phil Collins. (I'm willing to accept the possibility that Phil Collins is the Antichrist, but he sure as hell isn't writing music like it.)

Taken individually, Tracy Chapman is the least offensive. (Her most caustic criticism thus far came from writer Mark Jenkins: "This revolution won't only be televised; it'll be CD'd too.") She's made clear in interviews and with the single "Born to Fight" that she's uncomfortable with her whitewashing by the mainstream media, and her origins as urban troubador are genuine.

**Cartoon rock:** The others don't get off so easily. Don Henley will go down in history as the frontman of the Eagles, the most boring band in the history of recorded music. He couldn't get a reaction out of Daffy Duck. Phil Collins will be remembered as the leader of the second most boring band in history, Genesis. He looks like Elmer Fudd. Both of them write pathologically dull songs that have lately reached oppressive levels of hubris. But they have yet to reach the pretentious heights of their comrade-in-alarm, Billy "I'm the Italian Pat Boone" Joel, the Wiley Coyote of the bunch. Arrogant, doltish, perpetually unaccom-

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Bill Carter of the Screaming Blue Messiahs: something more than cartoon rock.

## Jagged rocks out of the mainstream

plished, Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire"—noted in Stallings' story—is the worst single in years. Basically, the song cascades through a litany of historical references and pop icons, spanning a period of late-20th-century American culture that is, of course, self-referential for the ego-maniacal Joel.

I'd like to quote the lyrics accurately but I can't, 'cause I'd rather break my own arm than buy the single. But I'm sure, with the relentless media saturation surrounding the hit single, that you've all heard it anyway. He does a New Yawk white-bread rap, simply reciting names and events: Joe DiMaggio, *Catcher in the Rye*, Joe McCarthy, Korea, Vietnam, Watergate, etc., then comes up with the refrain "We didn't start the fire/ It was always burnin' since the world's been turnin'."

What does this mean? It means Billy's been writing lyrics while on the crapper, that's what. *We didn't start the fire*. In other words, hey, man, this shit's been goin' on forever, man, and we're not responsible, man; it's just the nature of the beast. Bullshit. There were people behind and responsible for the Korean War, the House Committee on Un-American Activities—incoherent maniacs like Joel, probably—as well as the Yankees and Holden Caulfield. And Jesus—if we didn't start the fire that devoured Southeast Asia, who did?

Ultimately, rock'n'roll that conjures images of the violent destruction of a person, country or planet is widely shunned by timid radio programmers and journalists. Thus rap is continually snubbed (ever heard Public Enemy on the radio?), and the Clash's only stateside hit was the fluffy "Rock the Casba." So if you take your revelations seriously, turn the radio off and go down to your local record store for two recent releases that offer a chilling foretaste of hell: the Screaming Blue Messiahs' *Totally Religious* and Midnight Oil's *Blue Sky Mine*.

**Screaming blues:** *Totally Religious* sounds like a fatal car crash. Launching off with "Four Engines Burning (Over the USA)"—a *Doctor Strangelove* nightmare scrawled in craters by "the witchfinder general" who's "got four engines burning over your town"—the album is incessant mayhem from countdown to crash-down. Not that the music's sloppy; the Messiahs, a British trio headed by Bill Carter, maintain a taut, high-octane thrust, particularly on post-nuclear crunch punk like "Mega City 1," "Big Big Sky" and "Gunfight." Up until now the Messiahs have been jesters of chaos, particularly on their last release, *Bikini Red*, which had songs like "I Wanna Be a Flintstone" and "I Can Speak American." They were the Eddie Haskell of the underground, smart-alecky pranksters too

clever for their own good, who sounded like they would blow the roof off but sang about cartoons.

On *Totally Religious*, Carter—bald Bam-Bam if ever there was one—decides to get serious. While scream-along melodies are in shorter supply than on their first two albums (*Gun-Shy* and *Bikini Red*), lyrically it's their most accomplished to date. Consider "Wall of Shame," which ought to be played as a rebuttal every time "We Didn't Start the Fire" pipes in: "I used to be the wind in the Holocaust/Blowing through the dust of the souls that were lost/ The betrayer of all trust/ The holder of a fatal charm." In Carter's bleak world of rubble and steel, the blood-thirsty madmen have the upper hand and the streets are an inferno.

*Totally Religious* was recorded in Baltimore, and the sound of urban decay seeps off the tracks; victims are assaulted on the ground by cops and in the air by "nitro satellites." Hell, a fellow can't even get a drink, 'cause "it don't go down in this dumb town." That's from "All Gassed Up."

**I'm willing to accept the possibility that musician Phil "Filler" Collins is the Antichrist, but he sure as hell isn't writing music like it.**

the disc's only funny track, where you can't even leave your house without a hassle: "I took a little drive down the miracle mile/ Cop looked at me with the cutest smile/ Said get on the floor, pancake style/ I'm gonna take you downtown to cool off for a while." There's no hope at all. The record's final lyrics find Carter wailing, "I'm gonna be here the rest of my life" from his literal and metaphorical jail.

### Midnight Oil's still burning:

The members of Australia's Midnight Oil also know that we're in hell but want something done about it now. They impressed critics with their 1988 breakthrough album *Diesel and Dust*, and it's hard to criticize them for getting preachy because they write great songs. The Oils seek some kind of pure, aboriginal nirvana, but the dream is constantly polluted by thugs and corporate fixers—like in "Blue Sky Mine," the new album's title track: "So I'm caught at the junction still waiting for medicine The sweat of my brow keeps feeding the engine Hope the crumbs in a pocket can keep me for another night And if the Blue Sky Mining company won't come to my rescue If the sugar refining company won't save me Who's gonna save me?" They wrap their despair in pretty melodies falling somewhere between heavy metal and pop, and the effect is one of forceful conviction. (Incidentally, Peter Garrett, Midnight Oil's singer/spokesman, is as bald as a cueball, just like the Messiahs' Bill Carter. Coincidence?)

Midnight Oil's specialty is the Rousing Anthem—you know, *Never Forget, Fight Back, Don't Give In*, etc. And they know who the enemy is. They've been writing ecologically conscious songs for years, and the line connecting environmental disaster and governmental malfeasance is drawn often on *Blue Sky Mine*.

"So you cut all the tall trees down," Garrett sings on "River Runs Red," "You poisoned the sky and the sea You've taken what's good from the ground/ And left precious little for me." There's a fervent urgency to the music reflective of the doom the leaders we elected have made for us, as well as an honest, anti-rock star empathy with the salt of the Earth—"Don't put me on your bedroom wall," Garrett admonishes in "King of the Mountain."

Like *Totally Religious*, *Blue Sky Mine* ends on a hopeless note with "Antarctica": "There must be one place left in the world/ Where the skin says it can breathe/ There's gotta be one place left in the world/ It's a solitude of distance and relief/ There's gotta be one place left in the world." That's why the Oils are screaming—if such a place does exist, you can be sure it won't be around for long. And if Armageddon is coming, it will be a fire very much of our own making.

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**Cry-Baby**  
Directed by John Waters

By Pat Aufderheide

**A** FEW RATS AND A GROSS-OUT French-kissing scene are about all there is in *Cry-Baby* to remind you that director John Waters (*Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, *Desperate Living*) was once dubbed the Prince of Puke. There's more to recall the sweet wholesomeness underlying the antics in his recent hit *Hairspray*.

But *Cry-Baby*, a spoof of teen-romance musicals, does cut noisily and happily through conventions. It makes cultural renegades its heroes, gives a fat raspberry to the primly correct and—what a bonus—rediscovers some of the most obscure '50s rhythm'n'blues and rock.

In the end, it balances uneasily between the gleefully slapdash Waters tradition and the glossy production values and sympathetic characters that come with big budgets and studio distribution.

The year is 1954, the place Baltimore (Waters' hometown and home base, the place he has celebrated as "Trashtown, USA, the Sleaziest City on Earth, the Hairdo Capital of the World"). High school "Squares" and "Drapes"—leather-jacketed hipsters—battle for, among other things, the heart of a good girl yearning to go bad.

**Endless shenanigans:** The good guys are the Drapes, led by Cry-Baby (teen idol Johnny Depp, familiar from *21 Jump Street*), the orphan who sheds but a single tear. A punky street-corner Elvis, he wants his love (Ani Locane, banally blonde star of the film *Los Angeles*) to make him "the happiest juvenile delinquent in Baltimore." Keeping him from his goal are his true love's etiquette-happy grandmother (Polly Bergen in a masterful bit of self-parody), a jealous straight boyfriend (sharp-eyed Stephen Mailer, Norman's son) and, of course, the police. Helping Cry-Baby along are his own grandmother (teeth-gnashing Susan Tyrell), his fan club led by his pregnant sister (Ricki Lake), a sullen sizzler (ex-porn star Traci Lords), a terrifying Drapette with a trim body and grotesque face (albino actress Kim McGuire) and an odd lot of bikers and petty criminals.

The shenanigans are endless (and ultimately exhausting), starting with the Squares' attack on the Drapes' party headquarters and proceeding through jail, court and a theme park. Each site acts as a stage for musical numbers that range from raunchy to ridiculous.

Enlivening the background are a host of minor characters played, appropriately, by minor celebrities, most of whom have already used up their 15 minutes of fame: rock star Iggy Pop, one-time heartthrob Troy Donahue, long-time Waters actress Mink Stole, one-time Warholite Joe Dallesandro, dancer Joey Heatherton, revolutionary heiress Patricia

Hearst and ex-suburban sitcom kid David Nelson.

**The trouble with money:** The fun in *Cry-Baby* is immediate. It's in the energy of the musical numbers, the absurdity of individual scenes, the cartoonish set design and the silly jokes on an adolescent genre and the times that spawned it. But despite its wit and spunk, the movie loses its momentum.

The film's own good looks sometimes work against it. Waters' earlier movies were unabashedly crude, which both distanced spectators from the fantasy-gore and permitted a free association with one's own anti-establishmentarian fantasies. The fantasy here is well crafted, from production design to costuming to cinematography, so it's harder to be horrified or teased into giggles and easier to sit back and demand that the movie also deliver plausible psychology and character.

The young lovers—parodies of fashion innocence from another era—therefore seem particularly banal pretty-faces, undistinguished from

## John Waters' enduring social theme has been the way populist energy transforms commodity culture into popular culture.

their square peers except by a quirky choice of friends, clothing and music. True, the movie is dotted with oddballs who uphold the Waters tradition of wanting freedom, not power. They're not the main act, though.

But asking for psychological plausibility is particularly unfair to the best in a John Waters film (as opposed, say, to a Johnny Depp vehicle). The best of John Waters is never about plausible psychology—or plausible anything. It's about style and its coded relationship to morality. No wonder all the characters in *Cry-Baby* are cartoonish caricatures: they're referents to media icons. It's the style they choose—

Square or Drape—that marks their station and options.

For Waters, style is the road to the soul and humor the vehicle. He's the filmmaker who made semiotics sexy, who made conformity a fashion

## FILM

crime, who boldly asserted that respectability was a social disease of commodity culture.

**Pathological desires:** Moral themes run through all his work. His enemies are the guardians of respectability, those champions of the most anonymous and standardized in commodity culture. Behind their blandly proper exteriors lie patho-

logical desires far outreaching the idiosyncrasies and passions of his more superficially anti-social heroes.

His enduring social theme has been the way populist energy transforms commodity culture into popular culture. John Waters genuinely respects and admires the choices that go into assembling a unique personal identity off K mart racks and thrift-store piles. Indeed, only someone with a lavish affection for those choices could get away with poking such outrageous fun at the tacky and trashy.

In *Cry-Baby*, those themes still exist, but the stakes are lower. The bad guys are less diabolical, the good guys less strange, the fashion

codes less spontaneous, junky and idiosyncratic than in any other Waters extravaganza. Unlike *Hairspray*, fueled by its comic assault on racism, *Cry-Baby's* social edge is blunted. Teen-romance movies are not much of a target for scorn as sophisticated as Waters'.

Even so, there are moments of trashy splendor, and the whole thing is suffused by an infectious good humor. At the least, the never-predictable *Cry-Baby* won't establish John Waters as a safe crossover item. It's got too much ragged rebelliousness to be turned into a neatly packaged entertainment commodity itself.

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## Filmmaker John Waters: 'All my movies are very moral'

On a winter afternoon in John Waters' Baltimore living room—its scaled-down Tudor dignity desecrated by criminal memorabilia and plastic replicas of Japanese food—Waters talked about *Cry-Baby* and about his career manufacturing what he calls "good bad taste."

"Good bad taste is all about irony," says the tall, gracious man with warm brown eyes. "It's both repelled and attracted by bad taste: it laughs with it, not at it."

*Cry-Baby*, with its \$8 million budget and major studio distribution, celebrates "good bad taste" in a much lower key than Waters' earlier work. But that's not, he insists, because of industry pressures. Instead, take it as a sign of the mellowing of John Waters.

From the far side of 40, he says with urbanity, "I love getting old. I think it's hilarious that in some ways I've become part of the establishment. I'm a lot less angry now. I don't regret any of the wildness of my early days, but I think there'd be something wrong if I behaved like that now. You should have your identity crisis when you're young."

Although *Cry-Baby* lacks the shock value of Waters' post-adolescent comic-anger epics, it fits in the Waters film family, he explains.

"All my movies are very moral," Waters says. "The underdogs always win. The bitter people are punished, and people who are happy with themselves win. They're all about

wars between two groups of people, usually involving fashion, which signifies morals."

"It's part of a lifelong campaign against people telling you what to do with your own business."

Waters' shock-value screen fantasies have created a strange, if devoted, cult following. "People think I'm for mass murder, I'm for gore, that I like *Hustler*," he sighs. "Sometimes people write and tell me I've given them courage to do something I'd probably tell them not to do."

The real John Waters, he says, is a listener and observer, especially of what he politely terms "abnormal psychology." He's an avid reader of the crime page and a longtime addict of criminal trials ("the best theater in America, and it's free!").

His devotion to trials has left him with some unlikely friendships. He still, for instance, visits Charles "Tex" Watson, one of the Manson family, whose transformation Waters says "gives me complete faith in mankind." And he faithfully attended Patty Hearst's trial, although, as he later told her, he became convinced of her innocence only when he watched Paul Schrader's film *Patty Hearst*. Hearst happily accepted a role in *Cry-Baby* from the man who'd watched her trial for fun.

Waters' casting follows his appetite for the bizarre and his capacity to let others fascinate him. Waters effectively created Divine, and a film style to go with her. (Divine died—

suffocated in his own flesh—in 1988, and Waters doesn't intend to look for a substitute star-figure. "Some people are just irreplaceable," he says matter-of-factly.) He introduced Edith Massey (the "egg lady" in *Pink Flamingos*) and Ricki Lake, the cheerfully overweight star of *Hairspray*, to moviegoers. He's particularly gifted at finding the insecurities that wrack the fashion-haunted American woman and at creating female characters that give them vengeance on *Vogue*.

He explains his choices simply: "I look for personalities, people with a history. If people didn't have problems, I wouldn't hire them."

He does more than hire them—he adopts them. His film projects are as much the creation of ad hoc communities as they are products for the marketplace. If it's a community populated by often self-described freaks, it's also a safe haven.

"I think all directors are father figures," Waters says. "And I don't try to 'play' that role—I just am it."

Waters used to make movies for "people I'd want to have dinner with and make them laugh." Now he finds himself increasingly pitching his movies to the kind of people he wouldn't have dinner with—what he calls "shopping-mall people."

"I don't think people go to the movies to meet the people next door. On the other hand," Waters says with a characteristic chortle, "I can't think of a better group of neighbors."

—P.A.



Kim McGuire, Darren E. Burrows, Johnny Depp, Ricki Lake and Traci Lords are along for the ride in John Waters' rebellious romp.

Henry Garfunkel