

What If Thinking: Twisty homage pop

By Dave Yount

GUITARIST Howard Glazer and vocalist Gail Baker must be proud. What started basically as a studio project between them in 1983 has turned into touring and additional recordings. Detroit-based WHAT IF THINKING (the name means "What if we tried this? Or what if we tried that?") has toured the midwest, south, and most of Michigan, and currently has a single out with two bouncy tracks.

Their first record, an EP, received Billboard's top EP pick in March 1983, and they've been accruing favorable reactions ever since. Their music has been categorized as techno-pop or new music, but with Howard Glazer's fuzzy, squealing guitar work, these names don't fit just right.

Great synthesizer work on "I Want That Boy", the A-side of their 45 on Rude Records, is reminiscent of Devo, except that WHAT IF THINKING has a female vocalist. Heavy breathing, accompanied with lyrics like "I think she's gonna drive me crazy/And my visions getting hazy/As I contemplate her prize," quickly give you the idea that there's some serious lusty happening, but maintains tastefulness with its humor. The B-side of the single, "Run, Run, Run" has this whaling Jeff Beck guitar solo (that even J.B. might be proud of) in the middle of the otherwise B-52's/Talking Head's sound, for an interesting effect.

Their recent material (due out on their upcoming full-length LP) is just as danceable and fun as the single. "Survival of the Fittest" features Mike Staton's popping bass and Glazer's award-winning lead guitar synthesizer work. While it's a blend of

rock and roll guitar and Grace Slick-like vocals by Gail Baker, it still has an undeniable funky feel to it. "If 'Action, Action' can't get you hopping, there might be something seriously wrong with your ability to have fun. This Oingo Boingo-sounding tune contains rapid-fire vocals and two screeching guitar solos, one of which slowly fade in the left channel and out the right.

"Psychedelic Carnival" mixes two rather unlikely worlds — psychedelia and circuses. James Dragon's exceptional keyboard work provides the circus feeling, complete with keyboard-simulated whip cracks, and Glazer's underlying droning guitar adds the spacey, cosmic touch. Gail Baker's supplements floating lyrics and completes the mood as well as the two worlds, very effectively. "White Rabbit", a remake of the Jefferson Airplane classic, is done with just enough originality to make it interesting and exciting (achieved by changing the beat a little by drummer Al Waltz and using synthesizers), and yet do the original some justice by allowing you to recognize the fact that it is a remake.

WHAT IF THINKING deserves their award from the Detroit Metro Times for "Talent Deserving Wider Recognition-Band," and Glazer unquestionably deserves his Best New Music Guitarist award. Talent is written all over the band. Prepare yourself for possibly some of the best tunes and fruggin' Ann Arbor might see this semester when WHAT IF THINKING ponders for what at the Blind Pig tonight. It's an all-win situation: we experience great music while we give WHAT IF THINKING some of that wider recognition that they so clearly deserve.

Records

Joni Mitchell — Dog Eat Dog (Geffen)

Sometimes I am a little slow when it comes to popular music. It often takes me a while to catch on to what's happening. Case in point: the new album from Joni Mitchell, *Dog Eat Dog* seemed cold and contrived on first hearings. I was confused. When it comes to Joni Mitchell, I am easily impressed.

Joni has been among pop royalty for fifteen years or better and much of her well deserved reputation stems from her restless commitment to growth and change. Joni Mitchell does not excuse herself. Remember how surprised we were with the jazz polish of *For the Roses*? How these flirtations grew into the oblique poetics of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* and *Mingus*? How the return to pop roots tickled on *Wild Things Run Fast*? Well, the protean princess is on the move again. Joni boldly steps into the future. Is there life beyond MTV?

Dog Eat Dog hollers an affirmative response. Say yes. Slickaphonic production qualities abound. Thomas Dolby is co-producer and sideman. Drummer Vinnie Colaiuta could be anybody's second choice and, in

general, the group adds spice to Joni's strongly flavored stuff. Prominent among this new batch of compositions is a powerful opus called "The Three Great Stimulants." Rife with sympathy and apocalyptic vision, this tune shows that Joni hasn't lost her teeth. *While madmen sit up building bombs/And making laws and bars/They're gonna slam free choice behind us.*

Saxophonist Wayne Shorter appears to great advantage on a couple of pieces. His tenor is sinuous on "Lucky Girl" while Joni rhymes like wild: *Cheaters/Woman/beaters/And Huck/Finn/shucksters/hopping/parking/meters...* And thankfully the impish Joni Mitchell sense of humor is alive and thriving. Witness the wry qualities of "Smokin'" with its sample and hold gotta-have-another-smoke behavior problems.

It's all coming together for me. Slowly. And thoughtfully. I'm beginning to feel that this will be remembered as some of the best and most substantial slickaphonic pop music of the decade. And then some. Bravo Joni.

—Marc S. Taras

Doc and Merle Watson — Pickin' the Blues (Flying Fish)

It should be enough merely to say this is the Watsons at their usual: unbelievable.

Doc looks, sounds, and feels as if his guitar is a part of himself. He picks complicated patterns in the midst of essentially simple songs, and makes them seem simple.

His singing is remarkable here as well. With a weathered but strangely melodic voice, it's clear why he's been one of country folk's living legends for who-knows-how-long.

Merle is somewhat less impressive on his slide guitar, largely because he's less audible, and indeed, the album might well have been called a Doc solo album.

"Stormy Weather," "Freight Train Blues," and "Sittin' Here Pickin' the Blues" are typically strong adaptations of blues songs to the flat-picking style, and every one of them

works remarkably well. "Hobo Bill's Last Ride" is probably the strongest cut on the album, and with the best warbling, is unforgettable.

One particular liner note is sad-dening. Doc writes with pride that five generations of his family are alive in the Blue Ridge. A footnote points out, sadly, that his mother died shortly after the notes were written, and of course, national news reported the freak death of Merle last year.

But the album remains a strong one by one of the best in the business, and with Watson the co-headliner at this year's Ann Arbor folk festival, this album is a good way to preserve some of his show.

—Joseph Kraus

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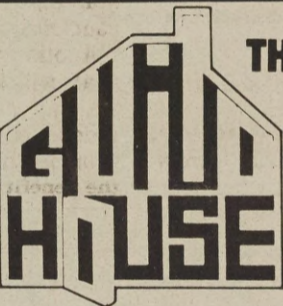
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Esther Broner is a novelist (*A Wave of Women*, *Her Mother*), playwright, essayist, professor of English literature, recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts Award and Wonder Women Award for 1983-84. She is a forerunner and visionary in her new rituals for women.



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