

11-22-89

record review

Sophomore Jinx

Melissa Etheridge—'Brave and Crazy'
Michelle Shocked—'Captain Swing'
Tracy Chapman—'Crossroads'
The Sugarcubes—'Here Today, Tomorrow, Next Week!'

Much has been made of the new wave of women pop artists—singers and songwriters breaking patterns and making waves, from the sonic acrobatics of Sinead O'Connor to the introspective folk of Suzanne Vega to the rambling psychedelipop of Edie Brickell. Four of the trendsetters have just released new records, each the second major release for that artist.

I'm sorry to report that the much-bally-

Etheridge has an amazing voice, technically flawless without sounding too polished, and her band is as tight as any group that spent years playing in bars should be. This LP's songs may sound like extensions of the first album, and side two degenerates into filler quickly, but there are some standouts, and "No Souvenirs," the album's first single, is Etheridge's best song to date.

It's just too bad that her success of 1988 couldn't spark a progression.

Michelle Shocked—*Captain Swing*

With her third record (*The Texas Campfire Tapes* had limited release), Shocked decided to leave behind the quiet, progressive folk of her past and try something entirely different. With many artists looking to African rhythms for inspiration, Shocked has released an album of songs in the style of jazz and big band.

Like last year's *Short Sharp Shocked*, Cap-

restrained anger sparked hopes of a folk revival of sorts. It's unfortunate that the songs on *Crossroads* sound like nothing more than outtakes from the last album.

If you're not yet sick of Chapman's debut, *Crossroads* is a good bet, but it's as disappointing a record as anything released lately. The songs are less accessible than before, and I don't know how much of what has been disparagingly referred to as "welfare lyrics" a listener is supposed to be able to handle. Her studied, dispassionate singing style is beginning to grate as well.

Worst of all, there is no "Fast Car" on *Crossroads*.

The Sugarcubes—*Here Today, Tomorrow, Next Week!*

Iceland's Sugarcubes made it out of the underground music scene in a hurry last year with a bizarre combination of heavy rock and traditional sounds that somehow clicked on

From whimpers to controlled shrieks, Bjork still works to stretch the capabilities of the human voice and is still a force to marvel at, but *Here Today* is irrevocably ruined by the production decision. The songs aren't enough.

I suppose we can keep waiting for a new Suzanne Vega record—or simply buy Nanci Griffith's beautiful, unassuming *Storms* or last week's major-label release of Indigo Girls' indie debut, the ethereal *Strange Fire*.

—MATTHEW BUDMAN



hooded sophomore jinx is alive and kicking. Though three of these have significant merits (I'll get to The Sugarcubes in a bit), they by and large break no new ground and add little to the innovations of their debuts.

Melissa Etheridge—*Brave and Crazy*

If Etheridge's stunning debut last year had a flaw, it was that nearly every song was sung from a specific point of view—a woman scorned by a lover whom she still wants. Over an entire record this grew tiring, and *Brave and Crazy* does nothing to change the pattern.

Captain Swing has no real standouts. Again, the songs are consistently decent, and Shocked's limited voice holds up to the more demanding material.

Unlike the Joni Mitchell albums of the '70s exploring the same territory, Shocked doesn't extend the genres or attempt anything too wild. The result is a relatively pleasant record, but the question "Why?" is a relevant one.

Tracy Chapman—*Crossroads*

Chapman made a huge splash with her 1987 debut; her acoustic guitar and songs of

Life's Too Good. A pair of vocalists created atmosphere: Female singer Bjork's mindblowing vocal acrobatics sharply contrasted with the spoken announcements of Einar, usually muffled or read through a PA system and rarely intelligible.

The band's attempt at growth and development was to simply put the singers on exactly the same level, leaving Einar's mindless, unrelated ramblings about lobsters and death and, presumably, whatever else happened to come to mind that day entirely open for inspection (and unintentional hilarity).