



Bettmann Archive

From Ravel to White: Love music for an electronic age

## AURAL SEX

Johnny Mathis sweetly croons "Chances Are" from a turquoise-and-white, gold-flecked portable phonograph in a darkened room, or the Stones blast "Satisfaction" out of a six-transistor radio behind a clump of bushes, or inside a parked car the Allman Brothers play away on the cartridge machine. Whatever the circumstances, nervous hands and pubescent bodies soon discover the relationship of aural stimulation and sex.

It wasn't until the invention of the phonograph that music and lovemaking could come together in the bedroom without having a chamber ensemble at the foot of the bed. The soothing strings and cascading harmonies we often think of as erotically evocative were a stylistic trademark of the Romantic composers of Thomas Edison's day. Actually, Debussy's broodingly passionate *La Mer* and Ravel's insistent *Bolero* didn't become popular bedtime classics till the advent of the long-playing twenty-minute record—twenty minutes is the average time it takes to make the beast with two backs. More recently, a *Canon in D Major* by Baroque German composer Johann Pachelbel (as recorded by the Musical Heritage, 1991 Broadway, New York, N.Y.) has become a between-the-sheets best-seller, an occurrence which prompted critic Alan Rich to thumb his nose at "Sexy Baroque" and comment, "Pachelbel was one of hundreds of poky organists who composed by the ream, but his *Canon* is today's turn-on music. . . ."

"My own favorite happens to be the first movement from Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste*," chuckles Dr. Demento, host of a nationally syndicated radio show dedicated to disc arcana. Describing himself as a "connoisseur of foreground music," he recalls the long line of *breather* records which have panted their way up the pop charts. "There was a tune called 'Teach Me Tiger' by

April Stevens that was considered too hot to play over the air back in '57. In the rock era you had Ian Whitcomb's 'You Really Turn Me On.' Then about five years ago there was a French record 'Je t'aime . . . moi non plus' featuring young English actress Jane Birkin doing some heavy inhaling."

"Put on the Dead and spread" was sound advice from the late Lillian Roxon, whose *Rock Encyclopedia* is still the reference book on sixties pop music. Lillian used to recommend the charms of the live *Grateful Dead* set, while the gentle "Dark Star" (all twenty-three minutes and fifteen seconds of it from the *Live/Dead* album) served as a stoned aphrodisiac for a whole generation of rock lovers.

Weight Watchers drop-outs can take heart from watching Barry White in all his corpulence become the record industry's latest sex object. White's black velvet growl of a voice and his pulsating soul orchestrations have a simple message: "Love power. The power of love."

White has successfully repeated his enticing formula on over a half-dozen albums in the last year and a half. Now other black crooner/composers are following his lead. *Music To Make Love By* is exactly what it sounds like, a parody of B. White by veteran hitmaker Solomon

Burke. Former Motown producer Lamont Dozier has recorded a sensuous serenade which almost lives up to his own billing as *Black Bach*. Still, the most complete soul statement on the subject remains Marvin Gaye's joyous *Let's Get It On*.

Even the Mystic Moods—by far the biggest-selling series of turn-on albums to date—have gone to a soul beat on their latest release, *Erogenous*. Producer Brad Miller's brainstorm, the Mystic Moods' concept of easy listening music mixed with environmental sounds has come a long way in twelve titles and sales of two and a half million copies. Miller began his career of vinyl stimulation by accident. As a producer of sound-effects records, he was surprised to find that one disc of railroad trains wailing in the night had turned into a bedroom cult favorite. In 1965 his sea-and-storm recordings became "must" programming on progressive FM stations up and down the California coast. A year later the first Mystic Moods release, *One Stormy Night*, marshmallow strings and all, generated enthusiastic word-of-mouth.

Of all the albums on the market today only one lays claim to having been consumer-tested as erotic accompaniment. "Greatly enhances lovemaking and mind-control," declares the sticker on

Syntonic Research's *Environments Disc 5*. "It took us three years to find the perfect sound," explains Irv Teibel, president of SR and the audio perfectionist responsible for such sonic environments as "Psychologically Ultimate Seashore" (electronically enhanced by a computer) and "Gentle Rain in a Pine Forest." "First we studied music like *Bolero*, which people had been using for years. Music has its limitations because it's hard for it to sustain a particular beat without getting in the way of the composition." Teibel settled on a natural sound and tried out eight preliminary recordings on close to a thousand volunteers. Comments the thirty-six-year-old bearded bachelor, "We found that people were able to make love better because they slowed down and took their time and interacted more intensely." What does Teibel call his greatest discovery? "Ultimate Heartbeat." That's right: a woman's heartbeat, only slowed down to forty beats per minute and reversed so the accent is on the first beat. Teibel had to make one other modification. "We had thirty minutes of heartbeat on the record, but we got complaints of people getting sore and overtired. So we ended up shortening it to twenty minutes—and most people thought it was just right."—Steve Ditlea ○✎