



Hootie & The Blowfish
Fairweather Johnson
Atlantic Records

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Producer: Don Gehman
Top Cuts: "Sad Capers," "So Strange," "Old Man & Me."
Summary: After their hugely successful debut, you might think the pressure would be on these southern-fried rockers, but their main intention seems to be keeping things loose and in high spirits. Darius Rucker's vocals are still muffled, so it's best to just hum along to the infectious hooks, whatever the lyrical point. The Fish offer up punchy electric delights, balanced by simmering blues and a few silky acoustic gems. The album title refers to fair weather sports fans, but the band's commitment and musical maturity will ensure they suffer no such indifference. —*Jonathan Widran*



The Cranberries
To The Faithful Departed
Island

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Producer: Bruce Fairbairn, Cranberries
Top Cuts: "Salvation," "Free To Decide," "I Just Shot John Lennon."
Summary: Once you get past Dolores O'Riordan's wavy vocal histrionics, the most intriguing aspect of this collection is its rhythmic diversity. Lush, harmonic ballads are juxtaposed with throbbing alternative assaults, cool soul textures and whimsical spiritual symphonies. These berries are at their sweetest when they strip away the many instrumental and lyrical pretensions and shoot straight down the middle. Nothing wrong with a little lunacy here and there, but not when it detracts from some truly inspiring modern rock. —*Wanda Edennetti*



Lionel Richie
Louder Than Words
Mercury

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Producer: Lionel Richie & Various
Top Cuts: "I Wanna Take You Down," "Can't Get Over You."
Summary: Richie scored an international triumph when he closed the 1984 Olympics with "All Night Long," his last bonafide hit. A decade later, Richie resurfaces with his knack for irresistible pop hooks. The strength of this project, however, lies in Richie's ability to pay homage to all that's gone on since he went into hibernation. The Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis produced "I Wanna Take You Down" puts him in a pseudo-hip-hop setting that works surprisingly well, as do the jazzy big band charts on "Lovers At First Sight." Richie took his time on this one, but it's truly worth the wait. —*Wayne Edwards*



Art N' Soul
Art N' Soul
Big Beat/Atlantic

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Producer: Timothy Christian Riley
Top Cuts: "Ever Since You Went Away," "U Changed," "That's How Love Goes."
Summary: Timothy Christian Riley has always been the laid-back personality of Tony! Toni! Toné! And it shows on this self-titled debut by the very Tony-ish Art N' Soul. The tunes—all written by Riley and/or the self-contained threesome—span the gamut from ballads to uptempo material, and they're all pretty much on the mark. The overall energy level, however, never quite kicks into overdrive, making for a disc that's great when you have card-playing company over, but if you're ready to jam, you'd be better off pulling the real 3T's off the shelf. —*Wayne Edwards*



Dave Matthews Band
Crash
RCA

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Producer: Steve Lillywhite
Top Cuts: "Two Step," "Too Much," "Say Goodbye"
Summary: Matthews and company fuse elements of other genres—most remarkably jazz fusion and world beat—into a mix that is long on rhythmic diversity and experimentation. The tasty, odd beats come at the occasional sacrifice of conventional pop hooks, but on their sophomore effort, the band seems more interested in playful jamming than any sort of convention. Violinist Boyd Tinsley and the baritone sax of Leroi Moore add spice to the mix, but it's Matthews' vocal instincts that carry the load, even when all the chops get in the way of understanding the words. —*Jonathan Widran*



Voice Of The Beehive
Sex & Misery
Discovery

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Producer: Peter John Vettese
Top Cuts: "Scary Kisses," "Moon Of Dust," "Playing House."
Summary: Female pop/rock hasn't been this infectiously fluffy since the heyday of the Go-Go's. Tracey Bryn and Melissa Belland infuse their infectious hooks with smooth vocal harmonies that are truly heaven sent. They negotiate the ups and downs of love and romantic risk-taking with equal degrees of edge and tenderness, finding a happy home somewhere between Pat Benatar and Amy Grant. Comparisons aside, the tandem finds their own niche, conveying anything but misery even when the lyrics touch slightly on cynicism. This beehive is part stinging and all honey. —*Nicole DeYoung*



Brooks & Dunn
Borderline
Arista

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Producer: Don Cook, Kix Brooks, Ronnie Dunn
Top Cuts: "My Maria," "My Love Will Follow You."
Summary: This record is filled with more overly produced, assembly-line country-pop schlock geared for the dance floor. There's little substance, which causes this all-formula project to hit a brick wall. The remake of "My Maria" is a highlight, as is the inclusion of the Buddy and Julie Miller song "Love Will Follow You." But for the most part, it's "been there and heard that" on this disc. Originality has flown the coop, and the same guys who showed such promise years ago with the hip "My Next Broken Heart" have sunk into a pool of mediocrity. —*Jana Pendragon*



The Gales Bros.
Left Hand Brand
House Of Blues

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Producer: David Z
Top Cuts: "Fight The Power," "House Of Blues," "Worried Man."
Summary: Funky, bluesy interpretations with the right blend of pop, rock and soul are found on this solid debut. The secret to their musical brotherly love is in switching off the lead guitar and vocal on each tune, so that fresh surprises (like a lulling acoustic ballad in the midst of the chaos) keep darting at us. The blistering electric guitars, explosive rhythms and loose ensemble vibe are constant, and the original material is so strong that even a tasty cover of the Romantics' "Talking In Your Sleep" comes as a lull. Paul Ebersold's co-writing deserves kudos as well. —*Nicole DeYoung*