BE HER LITTLE BABY

by Mitchell Schneider

PARALLEL LINES
Blondie
Chrysalis (CHR 1192)

“One way or another/I’m gonna getcha,” implores Deborah Harry on Parallel Lines, Blondie’s third and best album, and it’s mighty hard to walk on by. Like the ’60s girl groups from which she takes her cue, Harry—a thunderously sexy blonde from-a-battle—is obsessed with finding Mr. Right. Mr. Be My Baby: the Mythic Boy. But however much Blondie trashes the girl groups’ celebration of innocence, love and desire—“I will give you my finest hour/The one I spent watching you shower”—they glory in it as well. As if to prove her indebtedness to her models, Harry shelves the comedy and affectations on “Pretty Baby” and turns out her strongest vocal to date. “I fell in love with you” she purrs, then packs her acrylic fingernails, lipstick and compact mirror for the Lofty Register where she slips into a state of surrender. It’s a tender, moving moment. And a boy can’t help it.

Parallel Lines is no masterpiece. The novelty value of the experimental “Fade Away and Radiate,” with Robert Fripp on eerie guitar, wears off quickly; “I Know But I Don’t Know” monotonously reiterates the “I don’t care” pose. But the lp, knowledgeably produced by Mike Chapman, is a monumental achievement for Blondie. Unlike the mostly abysmal Plastic Letters, Lines’ emphasis on musical sophistication and production values rarely collides with the group’s comic vision and spontaneity. Besides presenting Harry as a commanding singer (though she sometimes doesn’t hold notes long enough), Lines is animated by its abundant hooks: overbubbled harmonies, skating-rink organ, reverb jingle-jangle guitar, drum rolls and funny nonsense rhymes. Most infectious is “Hanging on the Telephone.” As Harry projects both sexual frustration and romantic longing, cymbals crash, guitar riffs evoke “Pipeline” and the organ-guitar meld recalls Iron Butterfly. Almost as catchy is “Picture This.” If the beautiful guitar lines and gorgeous harmonies don’t confirm the song’s power, Harry’s vocal does; she intones such boisterously tacky verse as “All I want is a photo in my wallet/A small remembrance of something more solid” with real tenderness and urgency.

One of Lines’ best moments comes at the close of “Will Anything Happen?” a jumpin’ rocker moved by choppy chording and lockstep drums. Worried that the Boy will forget her when he becomes a rock star—the nouveau leader of the pack—Harry asks, “Will I see you again.../Will anything happen?” She sounds somber, frightened, almost crushed, but the fact that she bears up under the music’s momentum testifies to her strength.

It isn’t always Debbie’s turn to cry. True to her Frederick’s of Hollywood tackiness, she craves a boy whose eyes “tell me incense and peppermints” (whatever did happen to Strawberry Alarm Clock?), and on “Heart of Glass,” which lovably apes the Munich Sound, Harry whimsically sings, “Once had a love and it was divine/Soon found out I was losing my mind,” echoing the sentiments of Bryan Ferry.

Darlene Love might cringe from such satire, but you just want to rush up and give Debbie Harry a great big kiss—even when the ghost of Lesley “You Don’t Own Me” Gore pops up on the album’s finale, “Just Go Away.” Hair in rollers, her face covered with Stridex medicated pads, Harry lashes out: “Don’t be sad/I left you in the street/You’re prefab/Watch out, boys. One of these days her boat are gonna walk all over you.

WE TWO KINGS

by Michael Barrockman

JACK TEMPCHIN
Arista (AB 4793)

GOT NO BREEDING
Jules and the Polar Bears
Columbia (JC 35601)

During the great Point/Counter Point debates that took place between the East and West Coast a few years back on the value of L.A. country-rock, a one-album group emerged that pleased both sides. The Funky Kings, which featured Jack Tempchin and Jules Shear, was largely devoid of Silver Lake sentimentality, and the group’s inclusion of jazz and R&B strains brightened the mood and approach considerably.

Tempchin, who has favored songs about cars since his early Troubadour days, offers several on his debut solo album. But musically he seems to be stuck in sand. Most of the songs on Jack Tempchin are from an L.A. era gone by. The thump-along, acoustic-based country-rock style which Tempchin helped pioneer as the writer of the Eagles’ “Peaceful Easy Feeling” is past tense to most groups. But here, Tempchin utilizes this very same musical feel for many of his songs.

However, Tempchin remains one of the best contemporary ballad writers. His “Slow Dancing” is classic prom-pop. That’s not on this lp, but a song just about as good, “Golden Life,” is. The way Tempchin adds dry humor to a melancholy tale of love lost sets him apart from the serious, suicidal L.A. songwriting pack. The cure for the next ride: Sell the car and start doing wind sprints.

Jules Shear, on the other hand, isn’t running in place. Shear was primarily slow material with the Funky Kings; Olivia Newton-John even covered one of his songs. He’s taken a 180° turn on Got No Breeding: Jules and the Polar Bears let it rock. While the pace is fast and the sound row—post-punk—there is a heretofore unknown element: melody. And along the way, the group breaks some rules. “Got No Breeding” brings a new concept to meter in song: no stops.

Though Shear’s nasal singing sounds like it’s emanating from a shower rather than a studio, it’s as effective as ever lovable/self singers like Ray Davies and Jonathan Richman. On songs like “The Soul of Many Places” and “Home Somewhere,” when you can make out the lyrics, it’s even better. A soft, at times too inward performer in his old group, Shear lets loose his personality and eccentricities on his own. Many of his songs contain extraordinarily clever twists. (Sample lyric, from “Convict”: “The nice thing about cruel hopelessness is that you don’t have to try again.”) Overall, the result is bustling music without restraints—welcome sounds from the Cuckoo’s Nest in the age of Straitjacket Rock.