

# SUPERALBUMS

## HIT AFTER HIT AFTER HIT AFTER HIT

**BY MICHAEL GILTZ**

For the record industry, the late '70s and early '80s were the Dark Ages.

Recession gripped the country, but its hold seemed to be a little tighter on the music world. Album sales were down. Hit singles appeared to be fewer and far between. AOR (album-oriented rock) radio stations dominated the airwaves and, instead of trying to break a new group or create a little excitement, they were stilled by their own playlists. They played "Stairway to Heaven." Every day.

On top of it all, a booming new industry, video games, was swallowing up the pocket change of teenagers. A malaise hovered over the industry that couldn't be shaken.

Now it is 1985. Retailers call the previous year one of the best ever. Such major chains as Peaches and Record Bar report increases of 15

percent and 20 percent, respectively, above 1983, which was also a very strong year. During the hard times, some albums were reaching No. 1 on the charts without even going platinum (sales in excess of one million).

Now, practically every album that reaches the Top 10 goes platinum. Everyone is optimistic, upbeat and excited about the future.

Why? What is the magic cure-all that has revitalized the industry? What is the silver bullet that has banished their worries?

To put it simply: video music.

Paul Grein, who writes a weekly column that analyzes the singles and album charts for *Billboard Magazine*, emphatically agrees.

"Video has been a big part of it," he said, "and has certainly helped revive the industry."

Nonetheless, it has been argued that record companies are merely going through the ups and downs that

all industries experience: recession followed by growth. People simply grew bored with video games and started buying music again. Nothing has changed.

But, something *has* changed. A fundamental shift has occurred in how and why people buy albums. Every single, when it is released with a video, is that much more unique and gives the album it promotes a longer lease on life.

Consider: before 1984, only five albums in pop history had ever produced four or more Top 10 singles. They included the soundtracks to *Grease* and *Saturday Night Fever*, Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* and Michael Jackson's *Off The Wall* and *Thriller*.

Then, in 1984 alone, Lionel Richie had an album, *Can't Slow Down*, that had five Top 10 singles; Cyndi

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Lauper's debut album, *She's So Unusual*, has produced four Top 5 singles; and Huey Lewis and the News came out with *Sports*, an album that is still in the Top 40 after well over a year, and has hit the Top 10 with four songs.

Already in 1985, Prince has scored the fourth of his Top 10 hits from the album *Purple Rain*, and the Pointer Sisters have had similar success with *Breakout*. Plus, such diverse performers as Bruce Springsteen, Madonna, Hall and Oates and Wham! all have a good chance of duplicating this feat.

Indeed, the most encouraging sign of the times may be that soon only the albums that have had five or six Top 10 hits will receive recognition.

Is this important? Yes. Grein states that the fact that so many albums are having so many hits "... is very significant." It's not just a statistical anomaly and "... we're going to see much more of it from now on."

What is also important is the strong connection that all these albums have with video. For example, *Purple Rain* is integrally linked to Prince's hit movie, which was basically a long-form video.

Huey Lewis and the News and Cyndi Lauper both found success after the dawn of the Age of Video, i.e., after the inception of MTV. Also, both adapted very well to videos, making some of the most memorable ones on television.

But Chrysalis Records, the label Lewis appears on, does not believe videos are all-important.

Nancy Glucksman, the manager of video promotion for Chrysalis, firmly maintains that, "Huey Lewis and the News would have had a successful album without video on the strength of the material and constant touring."

On a positive note, she added, "Videos reinforced his image and helped to expose the band to markets his tour hadn't reached yet."

As a strong counterpoint, Cyndi Lauper declared that she is "... definitely a video artist." When asked in an interview if "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" would have been such a monster hit if music video didn't exist, she said no. *Billboard* quoted her as saying, "That song would never have been understood without the visual."

Indeed, the changes wrought by video go very deep. For example, *An Innocent Man*, the latest album from Billy Joel, has been on the charts for over a year and a half. It has produced three Top 10 singles ("Tell Her About It," "Uptown Girl" and "An Innocent Man") and two other singles that peaked at No. 14 ("The Longest Time") and No. 27 ("Leave a Tender Moment Alone"). The album sold over four million copies and has since fallen out of the Top 40. Traditionally, that would have been the end of it.

However, Joel has invested a whopping \$500,000 in a clip for his sixth single, "Keeping the Faith." Before videos, the sixth single from an album that wasn't still selling strongly would have been overlooked. *An Innocent Man* would be considered "old news" and radio would have passed over the single and waited patiently for a new album.

However, as a result of the video, "Keeping the Faith" has already bulletted into the Top 30 and will reach at least the Top 20, revitalizing sales of the album and possibly paving the way for a seventh single.

"I think it's remarkable," Grein said, "The success that they're having (with "Keeping the Faith")." "Such a thing wouldn't have been possible before videos," he added.

Joel's manager, Rick London, was quoted in *Billboard*

as saying, "Videos are programming-absolute, total entertainment programming... truly the ultimate in entertainment commercialism. It's a subliminal product plug. When you (see it), maybe you'll buy an *Innocent Man* album."

Even without hit singles, videos are important. Billy Idol has released four songs from his latest album, *Rebel Yell*. The title track stalled at No. 46 and "Eyes Without a Face" was a big hit, going all the way to No. 5. "Flesh for Fantasy" peaked at No. 29 and "Catch My Fall" fell after reaching No. 50. The statistics hardly look like the ones from a smash, long-selling album.

Nonetheless, *Rebel Yell* has reached double-platinum status (sales in excess of two million copies), for Idol has developed a strong personality and makes the most of it. "We see Billy Idol as a multi-format artist," Glucksman said. "Along with radio and press activity (both of which Chrysalis stresses as all-important and irreplaceable), video was instrumental in breaking an artist with as strong an image as Billy Idol."

Since Idol's first single failed to crack the Top 40, *Rebel Yell* illustrates another change.

Until now, without a successful first single to grab people's attention, an album was thought to be "dead." Idol has proven this wrong. So have the Pointer Sisters, who rebounded from the failure of "I Need You" with "Automatic," "Jump (For My Love)," "I'm So Excited" and "Neutron Dance," all of which were Top 10 hits from *Breakout*.

Music videos have also created a symbiotic relationship between music and movies. Videos from soundtracks invariably contain clips from the movies they promote. This creates interest in the movie, which creates interest in the soundtrack, which creates an interest in the movie, etc., etc.

This unique dual promotion has resulted in 10 soundtracks going platinum in 1984, which is more than the next two highest years for soundtrack sales combined. Those soundtracks are *Purple Rain*, *Footloose*, *Ghostbusters*, *The Big Chill*, *Yentl*, *Eddie and the Cruisers*, *The Woman in Red*, *Breakin'*, *Hard To Hold* and *Two of a Kind*.

Clearly, videos have changed the music (and even movie) industry. Perhaps nothing illustrates this better than the story of Joe Jackson.

After four critically acclaimed albums, Joe Jackson achieved his commercial breakthrough with *Night and Day*; the album resulted in three very popular videos and two hit singles. The next album was crucial, for it was Jackson's chance to broaden his audience and gain mass acceptance.

On the release of that album, *Body and Soul*, Jackson pronounced that videos were becoming repetitive and dull, keeping new artists out of the business and not even helping album sales. He swore never to make videos again. It was a very controversial statement that drew much attention. However, the album didn't. It bombed.

Obviously, the rules have changed. "(Video) has extended the life of smash albums," Grein said. "Instead of an album having three smash singles and a life of six months, an album might have six hits and last a year and a half."