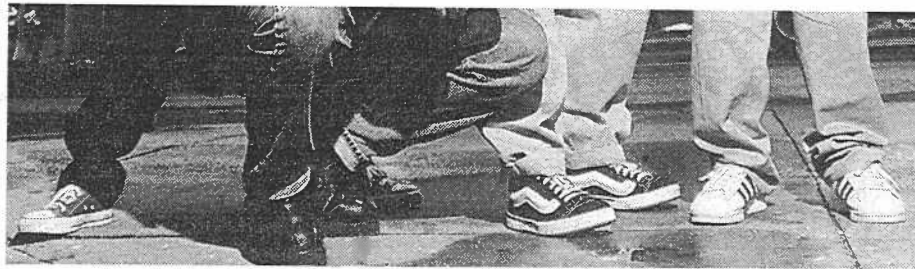


consider the likes of No Doubt and Smash Mouth. Their tunes are bubblegummy, their personas intentionally goofy. Despite the sonic updates found on their new albums, *Rock Steady* and *Smash Mouth*, there's not much about them that's relevant in a headline way, and their timing couldn't be worse. If wartime America has a habit of turning to escapism, it hasn't found its solace in perky Californian pop-rock: *Smash Mouth* debuted on *Billboard's* Hot 200 chart at No. 48 and fell 20 places in its second week, while its sunny lead single, "Pacific Coast Party," flopped thoroughly on every radio and video format. Thanks to Gwen Stefani's appearance on status-bolstering Moby and Eve hits, No Doubt's *Rock Steady* is bound to fare better, but its questioning, contemplative predecessor, *Return of Saturn*, would've been a better fit for this insecure season. Compared to sulky breakthroughs like Staind, Linkin Park, and Incubus, No Doubt and Smash Mouth seem silly, a throwback to the Reagan years of New Wave.

But that's not a bad thing. New Wave may have been considered punk's weaker kid sister, but in musical, sexual, racial, conceptual, and stylistic terms, it was often more radical and always far more embracing. Punk, as even the Ramones would admit, is the whitest rock ever, and that exclusionary legacy is still with us: Despite neo-metal's ham-fisted hip-hop ornamentation, it's mostly about the mob rule of unfocused rage felt by threatened, tribal-minded white guys. New Wave's message was the liberation of individuality, and that theme is one of the few constants uniting its rainbow permutations. You could embrace any genre and mix it with your clipped guitars, futuristic one-fingered synth lines, skankin' dance rhythms, hook-crazed tunes, punchy harmonies, and good-natured weirdness.

No Doubt and Smash Mouth are both old enough to remember early MTV's romance with New Wave and the wacky freak show its initial thirst for newness made possible. New Wave is for them roots music, its cartoon sensibility their own. *Rock Steady* takes the chart-minded r&b tactic of employing a party of producers and co-songwriters, but with New Wave results: Nearly every track glistens with salutary novelty, as if the band's unrestrained love of their record collections forced them to play magpie. As bassist Tony Kanal puts it on *Rock Steady's* CD-ROM documentary, No Doubt felt as though they'd "already done the organic rock-



SMASH MOUTH SQUEEZE OUT SPARKS.

band thing." Although work with Dr. Dre and Timbaland was left unfinished, the album boasts the involvement of the Eurythmics' Dave Stewart, the Neptunes, dancehall-reggae kings

Sly & Robbie and Steely & Cleve, William Orbit, fellow Brit art-popper Nellee Hooper, the Cars' Ric Ocasek, and Prince. Aside from the first two, whose songwriting collaborations ended up

At 52, Billy Joel Writes His Opus 1

## HE'S ALWAYS A POP STAR TO ME

BY KYLE GANN

In his first foray into classical composition, songster Billy Joel has proved himself a master of second-year college harmony. His aptly titled CD *Fantasies and Delusions* (Sony), its cover tricked out to resemble the standard G. Schirmer cover for classical sheet music, contains his "Opus nos." 1 through 10, all played by pianist Richard Joo. The pieces—"Reverie," a fantasy, three waltzes, an invention in C minor—sound like the product of some musicologist-comedian's PDQ Debussy, ranging in style from Bach to Chopin to Rachmaninoff and back, frequently changing harmonic idioms several times within one short work. From its near perfect replications of Chopin chord progressions to its naive supposition that composers still use opus numbers, it's pretty amusing. We're all in the mood for a melody, right? Especially if it sounds like one we've heard before.

Equally entertaining have been Joel's public statements about the disc. Interviewed recently on National Public Radio, he admitted that critics were dismissing his music as imitations of Chopin and Rachmaninoff. "They

thought they were putting me down," Joel laughed, "but, hey, those are pretty good guys to sound like!" He also provided a defense of attempted plagiarism: If you're going to write "melodic music," he explained, there are only so many notes, and you're going to end up sounding like *someone*. "Even Beethoven knew that; his early music sounded like Mozart!" Well, OK. I hope Joel remembers that, and declines to litigate, when I come out with my new pop song next month that happens to sound suspiciously like "Piano Man."

I know it's a pretty cheap shot, making fun of someone's first compositions, even if they are on a Sony CD that's stayed No. 1 on *Billboard's* classical chart for 12 weeks now. One could be forgiven for wondering what higher cultural purpose NPR is serving by turning down dozens of really interesting new-music composers for interviews every month and then promoting this drivel in their place. But what intrigues me more is the evident envy that such violently successful pop musicians like Joel and Paul McCartney have for the prestige of the poor classical composer—and the ease with which they think it is achieved.

They certainly don't feel that the prestige merits financial reward. Many will remember that ASCAP and BMI used to siphon off a small part of their pop artists' royalties to help support their classical or "symphonic" rosters. The classical composers, likely to make only a tiny fraction of pop artists' royalties, were given a proportionately larger percentage of actual income to slightly remedy the disparity.

Despite their allusions to bygone bands, *Rock Steady* and *Smash Mouth* both revel in 21st-century noises, and deliver nifty electronica surprises where the ska and thrash used to dwell. They're actually quite contemporary, albeit in an alternate universe without bin Laden or anthrax or the New Sincerity. No Doubt and Smash Mouth exist in John Hughes's California, not the one where bridges must be protected by the National Guard. If living in the present means playing Bob Dylan all day and watching CNN all night, I'd rather swap peroxide secrets with Gwen and hit the vintage clothing stores with Steve. Who these days doesn't need to take a holiday, even if it's only in their heads? **V**

But about eight years ago some of the major pop stars rebelled and insisted on every cent they had coming to them. In 1994, ASCAP and BMI buckled. One composer I know (oh, OK, it's me) used to get about \$500 a year in royalties on average before 1994, reduced to \$50 post-1994. Some or all of my yearly \$450 presumably gets added to Billy Joel's millions.

Well, it's fair, right? Why should classical composers be subsidized? Only think of Mozart, who at the end of his life was still paying more than half of his income for rent. Think of the trillions of dollars in royalties that daily performances of his music could have earned in the last 200 years. Shouldn't he have been entitled to enjoy a little of that during his lifetime? And before you protest that such tragedies are a thing of the past, think of Morton Feldman—who's had more than 50 CDs of his music appear since his death in 1987, compared to the three records that came out during his lifetime. The undeniable contribution that classical composers make is painfully slow to result in monetary compensation, frequently not until after the composer's death. I've long had a dream that royalties should be charged for music by *dead* composers rather than living, and divided up among the living ones. That would not only provide composers with an income, but remove the financial incentive that makes music by dead composers cheaper to play.

Quixotic? Perhaps. But no more of a fantasy or a delusion than Billy Joel's evident belief that people are buying his classical piano pieces because they're good: **V**