

THE GLOBE AND MAIL  
**THE ARTS**

Monday, January 14, 1991

# CROSS CURRENT

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*Pop's old guard  
prepares to do battle  
against a new wave*

**T**HE question was like a plague on my Christmas: why are popular music's two biggest stars being so defensive these days?

First there was Madonna. She released her greatest hits package, *The Immaculate Collection*, along with a titillating video single, *Justify My Love*. The ensuing controversy was the carefully orchestrated maelstrom we have learned to expect her. Almost on cue MTV and MuchMusic banned the video. Overnight Madonna became America's number one civil libertarian, a *cause célèbre*. Madonna found herself on ABC's *Nightline*, and then things began to go wrong. Under the punishing interrogation of Ted Koppel, Madonna was shrill and confused. At the end of the show, she even caved in on the key issue of enforced labelling of recorded material. The controversy ended quickly; massive initial sales of the video single have not held up. The sure-fire publicity coup seemed to miss its mark.

Soon after, George Michael, former lead singer of Wham!, released his album, *Listen Without Prejudice, Vol. 1*. Its accompanying video single, *Freedom 90*, has also caused a stir. As Michael rhapsodizes about how dreary fame really is, world renowned fashion models lipsynch the words. Critics have deemed it exploitive (of the models) and hypocritical (of Michael), which misses the point. What is amazing about this video is its rejection of his past work and its barbed insults against loyal fans. With such lines as "I was every hungry young schoolgirl's pride and joy" and "Ran back home to get a new face for the boys at MTV," it is clear that something has upset Michael a great deal.

Why this bitter edge? After all, both stars have been comfortably ensconced on top of the charts since the early eighties. Both were on the cutting edge of the techno-dance movement, a successful fusion of synth-pop and Motown. Both have also followed similar critical tides. When Madonna first

appeared, she was treated with contempt, a "boy toy" for sex-starved teenage boys; Michael in Wham! was equally scorned for having too much fun and looking too good. But, after seeing them stay at the top for years, the critics began to change their minds. Michael is now a sensitive artist, a "pop craftsman;" Madonna has come to stand for a kind of superwoman, the prototype of the sexy feminist. Their success has been overwhelming.

So what are they afraid of? Consider a recent chart of Billboard's top 50 albums. Four of the top 10 positions, including the top three, were occupied by new artists, performers who were unknown at the start of 1990. Although new artists appear regularly in pop music, rarely is their presence felt to this degree. But chart strength is only a symptom; the real horror for Madonna and Michael lies in the nature of their current opposition.

**N**UMBERS one and two were, respectively, Vanilla Ice's *To The Extreme* and M. C. Hammer's *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em*. These artists are frighteningly similar, presenting watered-down rap music devoid of political content. Theirs is a music unabashedly created by machines. The critics loathe them. But on New Year's Day, the two artists had remained at the top of the charts for more than 30 weeks, making them by far the most popular musical entertainers of last year.

Also in the top 10 were Mariah Carey and Wilson Phillipps, female artists who are part of a recent back-to-the-basics, singer-songwriter approach. They marry traditional pop melodies to the spare musical arrangements of such artists as Tracy Chapman and Michelle Shocked, although eschewing any political message. Theirs is a kind of nostalgic Pabulum, heartwarming, yet insubstantial.

Judged by the charts, new popular music presents us with two opposing directions: artless technotrons vs. banal neo-folkies. Michael and Madonna fall between these two extremes, and find themselves trapped. The esthetic compromise that held their music together has dissolved, and neither of the current alternatives holds much promise for a dramatic stylistic change. Michael and Madonna are unlikely to don acoustic guitars and throw away their makeup, having built their empires out of a smart manipulation of technology. On the other hand, progress, as represented by Vanilla Ice and M. C. Hammer, is probably too much for them to stomach, either. So what to do?

At this point, the game plan should be obvious: turn some heads with shocking videos, lash out bitterly at the critics and stake out turf for the ensuing battle. These two belong to an old guard that will not be defeated easily. Get ready for war.

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