

The Pop Life | Stephen Holden

■ Whose year was it? The year of George Michael, with a couple of teen-agers on the charts ■ A countdown: critics' favorite albums of 1988.

Year of George Michael

Surveying the past year in commercial pop music, 1988 was the year of George Michael. According to Billboard's year-end annual chart tallies, Mr. Michael's album "Faith" was the No. 1 pop album and compact disk and its title song the top single of 1988. Mr. Michael finished as the year's top album artist and its top singles artist.

Mr. Michael's achievement was all the more impressive because the singer, songwriter and producer does not belong to part of a broader trend. His artful studio pop has almost nothing stylistically in common with the metal rock that dominated the charts for most of the year. No less than six of the year's top 20 albums could be categorized as hard-to-heavy metal rock.

While rap music proliferated in 1988, yielding more gold albums (sales of over 500,000) than in any other year, 1988 produced no single rap album to match the commercial clout of the twin blockbusters last year, the Beastie Boys' "Licensed to Ill" and Run-D.M.C.'s "Raising Hell," each of which sold close to four million. The closest contender this year was "He's the D.J., I'm the Rapper" by D.J. Jazzy Jeff & the Fresh Prince, which sold over two million.

In 1988, two albums by teen-agers — Debbie Gibson's "Out of the Blue" and Tiffany's "Tiffany" — were among the Top 10. Will their vogue last? The answer should be known within six months after Tiffany's recently released second album, "Hold an Old Friend's Hand" and Ms. Gibson's soon-to-be-released follow-up have been on the market for a while.

The fad for movie soundtrack albums may have passed its peak, but there have been some remarkable exceptions. By far the most successful 1988 soundtrack album was "Dirty Dancing," which recently passed the 10 million mark in sales. Its sequel, "More Dirty Dancing," sold over three million.

At year's end, the soundtrack album for "Cocktail" seemed about to follow the pattern of "Dirty Dancing." Even though the movie has disappeared and three hit singles have come and gone, the album has assumed a commercial life of its own and remains near the top of the charts.

Here are the Top 10 albums and singles of 1988 as listed by Billboard:

Top Pop Albums

1. "Faith" — George Michael (Columbia)
2. "Dirty Dancing" — Soundtrack (RCA)
3. "Hysteria" — Def Leppard (Mercury-Polygram)
4. "Kick" — INXS (Atlantic)
5. "Bad" — Michael Jackson (Epic)

6. "Appetite for Destruction" — Guns N' Roses (Geffen)
7. "Out of the Blue" — Debbie Gibson (Atlantic)
8. "Richard Marx" — Richard Marx (EMI)
9. "Tiffany" — Tiffany (MCA)
10. "Permanent Vacation" — Aerosmith (Geffen)

Top Pop Singles

1. "Faith" — George Michael (Columbia)
2. "Need You Tonight" — INXS (Atlantic)
3. "Got My Mind Set On You" — George Harrison (Dark Horse)
4. "Never Gonna Give You Up" — Rick Astley (RCA)
5. "Sweet Child O' Mine" — Guns N' Roses (Geffen)
6. "So Emotional" — Whitney Houston (Geffen)
7. "Heaven Is a Place on Earth" — Belinda Carlisle (MCA)
8. "Could've Been" — Tiffany (MCA)
9. "Hands to Heaven" — Breathe (A&M)
10. "Roll With It" — Steve Winwood (Virgin)

Critics' Choices

Last Sunday, the chief pop-music critic of The New York Times, Jon Pareles, listed his 10 favorite albums of the year. Here are the favorites of the two other pop critics of The Times:

Stephen Holden's Top 10

1. "Tracy Chapman" — Tracy Chapman (Elektra)
2. Original Cast Album: "Into the Woods" (RCA)
3. "Stronger Than Pride" — Sade (Epic)
4. "Land of Dreams" — Randy Newman (Reprise)
5. "Nothing but the Truth" — Rubén Blades (Elektra)
6. "I'm Your Man" — Leonard Cohen (Columbia)
7. "Julie Wilson Sings Stephen Sondheim" — Julie Wilson (DRG)
8. Various Artists: "Stay Awake: The Songs of Walt Disney" (A&M)
9. "Short Sharp Shocked" — Michelle Shocked (Mercury-Polygram)
10. "Gipsy Kings" — Gipsy Kings (Elektra)

Peter Watrous's Top 10

1. "Blue Skies" — Cassandra Wilson (JMT-Polygram)
2. "Triplicate" — Dave Holland (ECM-Polygram)
3. "Look What I've Got" — Betty Carter (Verve-Polygram)
4. "Easily Slip Into Another World" — Henry Threadgill Sextett (RCA-Novus)
5. "Lovesexy" — Prince (Paisley Park-Warner Brothers)
6. "Guy" — Guy (MCA)
7. "It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back" — Public Enemy (Def Jam)
8. "Long Live the Kane" — Daddy Kane (Cold Chillin'-Warner Brothers)
9. "Daydream Nation" — Sonic Youth (Enigma)
10. "Days and Nights of Blue Luck Inverted" — Kip Hanrahan (Pangaea-I.R.S.)