

THREE ALBUMS SHED LIGHT ON POP SINGERS' CAREERS

By JOHN ROCKWELL New York Times
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The three albums under consideration here might seem oddly matched, and other than the fact that they're all by women singers, perhaps they are. Cyndi Lauper is a big if recent star; Bonnie Raitt has been around for years with a loyal cult but no mass success, and Rosie Vela is an unknown, with her debut album. But the three offer interesting, complementary insights into the relationship between music and image in the pop music of the 1970's and 80's.

Ms. Lauper's "True Colors" (Portrait OR 40313; also cassette and CD, like the other two records here) is a classic case of a second album following superstar success with a first (she also appeared as lead singer of an earlier disk by a band called Blue Angel, but that didn't really speak for her in the same way as her solo projects, and never caught on commercially even after her solo success in 1983.) "She's So Unusual," her solo debut, owed its charm first of all to its music, of course, but nearly as much to her kookily endearing image as projected through video. She didn't perform live all that much; the one concert this writer encountered was not nearly so persuasive as the videos, with awkward problems of pacing. But that's not so much a damning critique as a comment on the way video has augmented and in many cases supplanted live performance as a promotional tool and shaper of images.

The debut album offered a fine set of songs, some by her and some by others, quirky arrangements that echoed the organ-flavored textures and sonic gimmicks of bubble-gum rock and her own eccentric, squeaky but powerful and affecting voice. The video images reinforced this aural mixture surely, offering a ragbag hoyden whose spunky individuality overlay a determined sense of sisterly camaraderie.

The trouble with images in this image-conscious age is that people feel they have to evolve or change, if they're not to grow stale. In the three years since her debut, Ms. Lauper gave every sign of rooting about uneasily in search of new songs and a new style. What she's come up with on "True Colors" is a sleeker look that doesn't break totally from her old one, a new set of songs and a slightly different production approach. The result is an appealing record that fails to sustain the level of her first.

The big problem is the songs: the title track, a lilting number called "The Faraway Nearby" (by Ms. Lauper and Tom Gray, composer of the Brains' "Money Changes Everything," one of the hits from "She's So Unusual") and a few others are engaging, and nothing is downright terrible. But the level of continuous excellence is lower, and there are no outright winners among the slower songs to match "All Through the Night" and, especially, "Time After Time" from the debut album. Add to that a production ambiance that tends, in its apparent attempt to evoke early-60's-style New York rock, toward the clangorous and tricky, and you have an album that subverts the earthy directness of Ms. Lauper's voice and personality.

Still, this is an altogether honorable second effort, and it gives hope that now that the self-consciousness that attends any such follow-up is out of the way, she may be able to deliver a powerful third album in less than another three years. Certainly with her voice and her

unstereotyped charm, Ms. Lauper deserves a longer-lasting place in our pop-music pantheon than that of a mere one-shot wonder.

Ms. Raitt's career has followed a completely different course from Ms. Lauper's. With her affection for and indebtedness to the blues, her overt feminism and political idealism and her no-nonsense approach to image and style, Ms. Raitt is a defiant, even inspiring holdover from the mentality of the 1960's. The trouble is, she has never been content to accept a marginally noncommercial place within the record business, yet she has never found a sure path between her artistic instincts and the mass market.

The path still eludes her on her new "Nine Lives" album (Warner Bros. 25486), her first record in some years; the title seems to be a reference to her tenaciousness as a major-label recording artist. As basically an interpretive singer, her first task is to assemble songs that suit her and, presumably, the current public taste, but the set assembled here is a decidedly mixed bag. The production, by four different hands, tends toward the big, brawny and forceful, rather too machine-tooled and anonymous in the 1980's arena-rock manner. Ms. Raitt is in good voice, with her none-too-dulcet but strong and warmly individual instrument. But her sincere and idealistic image, honed through years of touring and benefit appearances, remains at odds with the commercial slickness aspired to here.

Rosie Vela was born in Galveston, Tex., and spent her teens and college years in Arkansas. In recent years, she's been a New York fashion model, and she looks the part, meaning that she looks very beautiful indeed. Having invested a considerable portion of her earnings as a model into a home music studio, she eventually gave a demonstration tape to a friend, the wife of Jerry Moss of A & M Records.

He, in turn, signed her and paired her with Gary Katz, who, among other projects, has been the producer of the cult jazz-rock band, Steely Dan. That band, which was basically a duo of the keyboard player Donald Fagen and the guitarist Walter Becker, has been in limbo, but Mr. Fagen and Mr. Becker joined Mr. Katz and Ms. Vela in the studio, along with several other studio luminaries like the guitarist Rick Derringer and the bassist Jimmy Bralower (both of whom are on "True Colors," too).

The resulting album, "Zazu" (A & M SP 6-5016), is decidedly appealing. Ms. Vela applies her sultry vocals to her own asymmetrically-shaped songs, with their disjointed, mystical, amorous lyrics enlivened by sharp, flowing and witty instrumentals. If there are parallels to be invoked, they would be to Kate Bush without quite the nutsy eccentricity; Rickie Lee Jones without the slurred, mannered hipness, and Joni Mitchell in her jazz mode without the self-involvement. This is a record well-suited for sensuous background music and for more attentive listening, as well.

People will naturally wonder - for an artist who is still in the process of assembling her first band - how much of the attention accorded her comes from her looks. The quality of her album partly answers that question, and to discredit a performer just because he or she happens to be beautiful seems needlessly puritanical.

But how much of her record's quality is due to her and how much to the Steely Dan team? Only time will tell. One suspects she has ample musical talent on her own, given her songs and her voice and her ability to bring musicians of this caliber together: Why would a producer

and players of this level of success waste their time unless they thought the project worthwhile?

For her musical career to last, however, Ms. Vela has to project her talents in live performance and sustain this degree of accomplishment over subsequent albums with other collaborators. And to keep her head above water in a music business restlessly in search of new sounds and new images, she has to evince the requisite business acumen and drive for success and ability to judge people. Ms. Raitt has plugged away at that task for years, and Ms. Lauper is engaged in it now. At the moment, only one thing can safely be said about Ms. Vela: her debut album is a winner.