

such as Nick Lowe, Elvis C., or the Boomtown Rats, all of whom will ultimately profit from Joe's commercial groundbreaking anyway.

Still, though everyone seemed to tumble immediately to the fact that the kid really had it, there was something of a critical backlash. He's a lightweight, and a conservative lightweight at that, people grouched—anti-Clash, if the truth be known. There's some little validity to the complaint, but mostly it's unfair. Nobody ever knocked Blondie for being apolitical or overly pop-ish, and to criticize Joe on those grounds is simply churlish.

Those who do will probably be unmoved, then, by the very real pleasures of Joe's new "I'm the Man," and they'll be the poorer for it: it's a superb album. Sure, Joe has a wonderful ear for the hook, and he isn't above singing love songs. But he's also as sharp-eyed (look sharp!) a social critic as any of his more activist contemporaries; he just doesn't make such a big deal out of it. More important, he leads what is one of the most interesting and distinctive bands (it's hard to imagine these new songs in any other instrumental context, they're so unerringly right) to have emerged from the whole New Rock movement.

This can hardly be overstressed. What makes the Clash exciting is, among other things, that they're unschooled musicians playing well beyond their limits. Joe Jackson and company achieve a comparable excitement by coming from the opposite direction: they're players of enormous accomplishment doing their damndest to strip their music down to its elemental essentials. The result is almost always exhilarating, the more so because they

Joe Jackson's "I'm the Man": Making the World Safe for Punk

THAT both Joe Jackson's debut album, "Look Sharp!", and its sublime single, *Is She Really Going Out with Him?*, made substantial chart inroads and even garnered AM (!) airplay (something few New Wave acts have been able to do except for Blondie, who cheated by going disco) should have come as no surprise to anyone. It was only a matter of time before a vaguely punk attack on those bastions of conservatism was mounted by somebody whose roots run a little deeper than those belonging to someone who first picked up a guitar in 1977. That Joe got there ahead of the pack only proved he understood the larger (read: American) audience better than his otherwise accessible colleagues did—



Ebet Roberts

JOE JACKSON: *not just another snappy dresser*

make it all sound so effortless. Anyone who can listen to a song like this album's *Don't Wanna Be Like That* without being left breathless is just trying to be difficult; rock-and-roll this kinetic needs no apologies.

Add to all this a sense of humor that is pointed without being nasty (*The Band Wore Blue Shirts* is a wry tale of Joe's days as a lounge pianist, *Kinda Kute* is self-aware pop revisionism, the title song is one of the neatest critiques of consumerism in ages, and *It's Different for Girls* is haunting, delicate sexual satire) and you have to concede that Jackson is on the verge of becoming a major figure. In fact, let me go way out on a limb here: he may well become (and deservedly) the first platinum star of the post-punk era. Not because he's somehow pulled punk's teeth, but because, in his own modest, canny way, he's an original with something interesting to express musically and lyrically, and he has a wonderful sly grin to temper his sincere put-downs. Don't miss "I'm the Man." It's got a great beat, you can dance to it, and any rational person would give it a 95.

—Steve Simels

JOE JACKSON: *I'm the Man.* Joe Jackson (vocals, piano, harmonica, melodica). Gary Sanford (guitar); Dave Houghton (drums, vocals); Graham Maby (bass, vocals). *On Your Radio; Geraldine and John; Kinda Kute; It's Different for Girls; I'm the Man; The Band Wore Blue Shirts; Don't Wanna Be Like That; Amateur Hour; Get That Girl; Friday.* A&M SP-4794 \$7.98, © 8T-4794 \$7.98, © CT-4794 \$7.98.