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A Capitol Year at the Record Companies

By PATRICK GOLDSTEIN

With M.C. Hammer and Vanilla Ice easily outselling the competition for the past six months, you'd have to call 1990 the year hip-hop went pop and got hot.

A tidal wave of rap music swept through the record industry in a tumultuous year marked by a string of censorship battles, the sale of Geffen Records, the fall of longtime CBS Records kingpin Walter Yetnikoff and the launching of a battery of new record labels. Of course, these expansion plans come as the industry's five-year hot streak (fueled in part by huge CD catalogue sales) sputtered to a close, forcing record companies to gear up for a possible 1991 recession-fueled sales slump. Many observers are already predicting that many of the new labels, especially the ones without deep-pockets financing, could be out of business by 1992.

With those grim tidings in mind, let's look at Pop Eye's annual Record Company Scorecard, which gauges the winners and losers among the industry's major record companies. In show biz, perception is reality. Since many labels won't divulge specific sales figures and profit margins, we're judging companies as much on their industry image as their sales performance. The following assessments are based on interviews with a dozen industry experts who rated each major record label's 1990 performance.

A&M RECORDS: It's a sign of how

dire the straits are at A&M that the label has been forced into an outlandish bidding war to keep Janet Jackson simply because the pop diva is A&M's only guaranteed multi-platinum superstar. Insiders say Jackson could get as much as \$8 million to \$10 million a record as part of a proposed four-album deal.

POP EYE

At those prices, it would be an uphill battle for A&M to recoup its investment, but once you get past Sting, the label doesn't have many other assets to work. The label's new chief, the capable Al Cafaro, has his work cut out for him, especially if he also has to replace colorful promotion chief Charlie Minor, who wants more money—or his own label to run.

ARISTA: It was the Year of Vanilla-Gate. As one wag put it, when's the last time you saw so much press about an Arista act without Clive Davis hovering nearby, boasting about how he picked the singles and designed the album cover? Arista's longtime chief has been uncharacteristically mum about his role in the Milli Vanilli debacle. Still, he deserves credit for squeezing sales out of Arista's old pop warhorses, Barry Manilow and Carly Simon, while breaking the Urban Dance Squad and country crooner Alan Jackson. That helps make up for poor showings from Hall & Oates and Eurythmics—and keeps the label going while his promo staff tries to keep its expensive new Whitney Houston album alive.

ATLANTIC: With Doug Morris being promoted to co-chairman, it

looks as if Ahmet Ertegun is finally giving up the reins and letting his trusted lieutenant run the show. Morris deserves the shot. He's shrewdly expanded the label's horizons, striking alliances with home video and film companies while creating new labels for up-and-coming execs like Sylvia Rhone to run. Rhone especially deserved a promotion, especially after reviving Atlantic's black music department and breaking acts like En Vogue, Michel'le, Troop and Skyy. Meanwhile Atlantic made a ton of money with its Led Zeppelin boxed set, miraculously revived Bette Midler's recording career and has somehow kept Phil Collins cranking out pop hits.

CAPITOL: New label chief Hale Milgrim showed at just the right time. It was a dream year at the Tower, which boxed the compass with hits in rap, pop, hard rock and country. Rap star M.C. Hammer grabbed most of the headlines with a *h-u-u-u-ge* album that dominated the charts all summer. But Poison's album was a major rock hit, Bonnie Raitt kept selling to pop oldsters and Garth Brooks took the country audience by storm. So far Capitol hasn't broken many of its new rock acts, but watch for the label to make a bid for distribution rights to Sub Pop Records, the hot Seattle-based alternative-rock independent label.

CHRYSALIS: Traditional wisdom says this pint-sized company should be struggling to stay alive, but somehow chieftain John Sykes has kept the sales machinery humming, even in the face of a lukewarm album from mainstay Billy Idol. The label's biggest success was Sinead O'Connor, the year's brightest new pop star, but it also had strong sales from hard-rockers



ANGELICA CHAPLIN
Bell Bi DeVoe: one of MCA's successful New Edition spinoffs.

Slaughter. Insiders say that the unsung hero here is Nigel Grange, whose British-based Ensign Records provided Chrysalis with O'Connor as well as critical faves the Waterboys and World Party.

COLUMBIA: Don't let the media furor over the messy departure of Walter Yetnikoff (who was ousted earlier this year—apparently with the blessing of his closest cronies) overshadow this label's rousing successes. Columbia has easily overtaken Arista as the home of the hottest pop-hit machinery, largely thanks to key exec Don Ienner, who learned at the feet of his former boss, Arista's Clive Davis. The label masterfully exploited teen-dreams New Kids on the Block, kept Billy Joel alive and executed a textbook promotion blitzkrieg with Mariah Carey, who got invaluable TV exposure (thanks to the label's marketing wizards) from a prime-time national anthem shot during the NBA finals. The label had a few climbers—it couldn't break Midnight Oil and it's struggling to salvage a lackluster George Michael album. But it had a hot hand with jazz, cashing in with the Marsalis brothers, Harry Connick Jr. and selling so many "Mo' Better Blues" soundtrack albums that label execs have boasted that the record made more money than the movie.

DEF-AMERICAN: The true wild card of the rock deck. Run by Rick Rubin, a rap Svengali turned hard-rock savant, D-A had a wild year. It provided its distributor, Geffen

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