Scratch Pad 13

Based on *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life*, No. 3, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the November 1995 mailing of Acnestis.

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The usual sackcloth and ashes bit

This is the moment I knew would arrive as soon as I joined this apa. How will I save my membership? I don't have time to do mailing comments, because I've been putting my three-week break into an effort to (at last) publish the latest *Metaphysical Review*, which I will send you. Yes, I know I haven't sent you No. 19/20/21 yet. I'll buy the postage stamps any week now.

Last week I used the handy Wordstar word counter to add up the latest issue. 140,000 words. Gulp. That's at least 150 pages, probably nearer 160 pages. In folded A3 format, that poses difficulties for the printer. And I still have about 20,000 words to write. So the next delivery will not be one giant baby, but twins. Expect them from your local truck.

The sackcloth and ashes is because the following is an excerpt from the giant twin *TMR*s. Sorry, but I don't have time to write anything else, although I want to get stuck into my list of the Top 100 Writers as soon as possible.

Listomania

These items in the following lists are those that I have read, seen or heard *for the first time* during the year given. I'm a bit behind on listening to my CDs; hence my list of Favourite CDs is a year out of synch with the other lists.

1994
FAVOURITE NOVELS

1 *A Dark-Adapted Eye* (Barbara Vine; 1986; Penguin; 300 pp.). **2 *Possession: A Romance*** (A. S. Byatt; 1990; Vintage; 511 pp.). **3 *Waterland*** (Graham Swift; 1983; Picador; 310 pp.). **4 *The House of Stairs*** (Barbara Vine; 1988; Penguin; 282 pp.). **5 *Chamber Music*** (Doris Grumbach; 1979; Hamish Hamilton; 213 pp.). **6 *Talking to Strange Men*** (Ruth Rendell; 1987; Arrow; 300 pp.). **7 *The Crocodile Bird*** (Ruth Rendell; 1993; Arrow; 359 pp.). **8 *The Custom of the Country*** (Edith Wharton; 1913; Signet Classics; 370 pp.). **9 *From the Teeth of Angels*** (Jonathan Carroll; 1994; Doubleday; 212 pp.). **10 *Genetic Soldier*** (George Turner; 1994; Avo-Nova/Morrow; 403 pp.). **11 *Saint Maybe*** (Anne Tyler; 1991; Chatto & Windus; 337 pp.). **12 *Gallowglass*** (Barbara Vine; 1990; Penguin; 296 pp.).

Five novels from my Top 12 are written by the same person, under the pseudonyms Ruth Rendell and Barbara Vine. At this end of 1995 I find it startling to realise that I had read none of her books until early 1994.

Talking to Strange Men, the first of her books that I read, is irresistible. A man thinks he has found evidence of a spy's information drop. His attempts to take into account this new element in his life changes it and him. In alternating chapters, Rendell shows us that the 'spy drop' is part of an elaborate game played by boys who, sent to separate schools, are keeping in touch with each other. In turn, the game leads to situation of danger. The man never knows about the boys; the boys never find out who has been spoiling their game. The sense of menace is made greater because there is no investigator, apart from the author and reader, who can resolve the situation.

That was my introduction to one-third of Ruth Rendell's novels. They are usually called her 'psychological thrillers'. I call them good novels. The famous one-third of Ruth Rendell is the author of the Inspector Wexford mysteries. To judge from the few I have read, they seem to be written by a different person. Their plots are filled with red herrings, but are usually well resolved. The quality of the prose is slapdash by comparison with that in the psychological novels. They don't stray much from the time-honoured structure of the police detective novel.

The Rendell who provides the greatest pleasure is 'Barbara Vine'. Rendell says that she feels and writes quite differently when she becomes Vine, but I don't see much difference in prose style between the Vine novels and the most recent Rendell psychological novels. The Vine books are usually written in the first person by an unreliable narrator, but so are some of the later Rendell novels. The Vine novels are Rendell novels, only more so.

I forget which novel won the Booker Prize in 1987,

but *A Dark-Adapted Eye* should have. It's the best recent British novel I've read. A woman remembers her two aunts, and the part she played in their lives. Why is one of her aunts being hanged for the murder of the other? When she was a child, just before World War II, the narrator visited them regularly, when they were young and very attached to each other. They grew up in different circumstances, one to be poor, one to be rich. One of them has a child. The battle over this child, and the part the narrator plays in that battle, becomes the subject matter of the novel.

Yet nothing in the subject matter explains Vine's ability to make the reader live through this battle. It's because the narrator is an innocent. Like Henry James, Vine sees the innocent participant as the most dangerous person in any human situation. The reader's viewpoint is restricted to the claustrophobic viewpoint of the narrator, yet sometimes glimpses just beyond it. It's this feeling that things should not work out quite *this* badly that gives emotional power to the book. And, of course, that the narrator knows information, unavailable to anybody else, that makes the conclusion of the story entirely ambiguous. In a Barbara Vine novel, we can never know the truth about any situation.

In *House of Stairs* we find out much more of the truth, but again the antics of the innocent narrator have appalling effects on the main characters. The strength of Vine's/Rendell's writing is that she lets nobody off the hook. She is implacably cruel to everyone, because every character acts out his or her nature. *House of Stairs* is the great novel about one of Rendell's/Vine's obsessions: the ability of a strong person to take almost any action to protect her (usually her) possession of a beloved house. It often seems to be the same house, although the one in *House of Stairs* is architecturally rather different from those described in *Gallowglass*, *Kissing the Gunner's Daughter*, *A Fatal Inversion*, *Judgment in Stone* and *The Crocodile Bird*.

The narrator makes friends with a much older woman who inherits an enormous house in London. The older woman is lonely and naive enough to throw her house open to an assortment of people who might keep her company. It is obvious to the reader that some of these people might hatch a plan to gain possession of the house; only the narrator fails to see how she might be made part of this plan.

Gallowglass is, I suppose, much the same plot, yet reads quite differently because of the nature of the participants. A slightly simple young man becomes very attached to a cool, cruel man who enlists him in a campaign to kidnap an heiress. She lives in a lonely house in the country (more or less the same house as in the other books). Although it is surrounded by woods, it is well guarded, and there is only one driveway. The narrator's sympathies are with the young woman, but his love and allegiance is with her kidnapper. *Gallowglass*, written in *faux naïf* style, is the best crafted of Vine's novels, and all the more chilling for the way the narrator tries to leave himself out of an enterprise that has him at its centre.

The Crocodile Bird is set around a large, lonely house that in appearance is much like that featured in *Gallowglass*. A woman has spent her life as the housekeeper, accompanied only by her daughter. She has never allowed her daughter to go to school or leave the grounds of the house. The daughter, who is the narrator, seizes the one chance she's offered to escape, yet in doing so she leaves her mother to face arrest. *The Crocodile Bird* is made all the more memorable because we only have the daughter's memories from which to reconstruct the 'real' situation.

A. S. Byatt's *Possession* is, in a way, a Barbara Vine novel that lets the characters off the hook. It's both better written than the usual Vine/Rendell book and not nearly as well made. The main character finds a small scrap of evidence that sets him and his friend off on a literary treasure hunt. The object: all the glittering prizes of literary scholarship. The subjects: two people who lived more than a century ago. Byatt cheats: in the end she has to give us information unavailable to the main twentieth-century characters. On the way she has a romp, composing reams of mock nineteenth-century verse, dragging main characters and the reader around the dank English countryside, and in the end . . . well, that would be unfair to tell you. *Possession* is a spectacular, amiable book.

It says something about *Waterland* that I cannot remember much about the characters, most of whom come to bad ends, but I remember images of the spectacular Norfolk fenland. This is geographical fiction at its best, laced with much historical tale-telling and glorious snapshots of amazing happenings.

In some other years, *Chamber Music* might have made it to No. 1. It seems a meek little novel, told in the first person by a woman who becomes the unloved wife of a major American composer at the turn of the century. Grumbach's understated style is a perfect voice for the wife's modest view of herself. She does not ask herself why she should have to endure so much; we simply endure it with her. Her cold husband suffers from a mystery illness that debilitates him. Only after much time can the narrator admit to herself that the illness is syphilis. After the situation seems to right itself, she must suffer another blow. She never recovers from that second blow, but it does enable her to live inside her own mind and write the truth about her husband.

I picked up *Chamber Music* in a bargain basement, and I've never seen it since. But it is a fine, haunting American novel; grab it if you see it anywhere.

I'm being a bit unfair to Edith Wharton in relegating *The Custom of the Country* to No. 8. I was very gung ho about her books in 1993! This book's sense of irony is as fine as that found in any other Wharton novel, and the writing is as readable as ever. But the main character is one of the great monster women of fiction; worse, a monster who never looks like losing! The fun of the novel is watching her nearly collapse under her own excesses (mainly her ability to spend infinite amounts of money) but somehow pick herself up in time. The disappointment of the novel is that she never gains self-knowledge; she remains a spoilt child who, given everything, destroys everyone around her.

From the Teeth of Angels is Jonathan Carroll's best novel since *The Land of Laughs*, his first novel, which I discussed in detail in a recent *SF Commentary*. It has a modest structure that works much better than the baroque castles of many of his recent novels. A person suffers from a mysterious fate, one that will certainly kill him. A woman meets the love of her life, and finds out the terrifying truth about her lover. In the process, they, the reader and, I suspect, Carroll discover something about Life that they had never before suspected. From what seems a gloomy tale one carries away an unexpectedly light feeling. Not that there's much reassurance; it's just Jonathan Carroll telling us again that the world is much stranger that we can ever imagine.

Genetic Soldier can hardly be compared to any of George's other novels, science fiction or otherwise.

Humans, gone from Earth for many centuries, return to a planet that does not want them, and will employ any possible means to eject them. The humans, with nowhere else to go, claim their birthright. The conflict is made complex because we do not know the nature of the society to which the spacefarers have returned. At first it seems like a simple rural utopia, with small numbers of people living comfortably in an uncrowded world. The main character, a soldier from Earth who finds himself caught up with the spacefarers, is forced to question every assumption he has made about his own society. *Genetic Soldier* works because we keep thinking we have discovered the true nature of the new Earth, only to find that we have been wrong. Turner's double ending is highly successful.

Saint Maybe is another of Anne Tyler's tales of almost frighteningly sympathetic characters, people whose fates become so important to the reader that it's sometimes hard to read on. The main character is the 'Saint Maybe', a person who can't help being the good guy, although it never helps him much. When he decides to become a saint in the much more oldfashioned sense, he becomes a pain in the neck to the people who love him most. I suspect that Anne Tyler never sets out to write complex, fragile tales; her books just turn out that way.

1994
FAVOURITE BOOKS

1 ***A Dark-Adapted Eye*** (Barbara Vine; details already given). **2** ***Possession: A Romance*** (A. S. Byatt (details already given). **3** ***Where I'm Calling From: The Selected Stories*** (Raymond Carver; 1988; Harvill/HarperCollins; 431 pp.). **4** ***Waterland*** (Graham Swift; details already given). **5** ***The House of Stairs*** (Barbara Vine; details already given). **6** ***Chamber Music*** (Doris Grumbach; details already given). **7** ***Collected Poems 1942–1985*** (Judith Wright; 1994; Angus & Robertson; 436 pp.). **8** ***Talking to Strange Men*** (Ruth Rendell; details already given). **9** ***The Crocodile Bird*** (Ruth Rendell; details already given). **10** ***The Chalk Giants*** (Keith Roberts; 1974; Panther; 267 pp.). **11** ***A Life in Movies: An Autobiography*** (Michael Powell; 1986; Heinemann; 705 pp.). **12** ***Million-Dollar Movie*** (Michael Powell; 1992; Mandarin; 612 pp.). **13** ***You Are Now Entering the Human Heart: Stories*** (Janet Frame; 1984; Women's Press; 203 pp.). **14** ***The Custom of the Country*** (Edith Wharton; details already given). **15** ***From the Teeth of Angels*** (Jonathan Carroll; details already given). **16** ***Genetic Soldier*** (George Turner; details already given). **17** ***Saint Maybe*** (Anne Tyler; details already given). **18** ***The Passing of the Dragons: The Short Fiction of Keith Roberts*** (1977; Berkley Medallion; 307 pp.).

I reviewed *Where I'm Calling From* on p. 107 of *The Metaphysical Review* 19/20/21 (yes, I will send it to you Real Soon Now). In summary: Carver's brilliance is his ability to use simple words and sentence structures to give complex and uneasy meanings to the lives of people who consider themselves ordinary. He shows us that his characters and their circumstances are extraordinary, and I wish I knew how he does it. Most people (including umpteen bad Australian writers) who try to imitate Carver fail. Carver rarely failed, and I wish he were still alive and writing.

Since Judith Wright has a fair claim to the Nobel Prize, why did I place her *Collected Poems* at No. 7 instead of No. 1 on this list? Perhaps I read too many of her poems at one sitting. I can't see any lessening in her formal facility over the years, but in the poems written after the 1950s she never shows quite the dazzling quality of the earliest poems. Wright was a seer in her early years, cutting through the layers of Australian psychic palaeontology, expressing a vision that sees all of us as products of ancient forces. In later years Wright settled into a much narrower style of poetry. Or maybe I became used to her habit of mind. I still like her poetry better than Seamus Heaney's, this year's winner, so maybe she'll cop the Nobel Prize next year.

I feel that I don't need to talk about *The Chalk Giants* because I've already written about it in detail — but my essay still hasn't appeared anywhere but a tiny-circulation fanzine for ANZAPA. Since no *SFC* has appeared since then, you haven't seen my essay.

The Chalk Giants is a fix-up, one of the best in the sf field, but that's all it is. It's not a novel. The individual stories include some of Roberts's best (especially 'Monkey and Pru and Sal' and 'The God House'). I don't think *The Chalk Giants* has ever been reprinted, but it still turns up in secondhand stores.

The Passing of the Dragons is a fine American 'Best Of' collection of Roberts's short fiction from the 1960s and early seventies. It shows that his talent extended beyond the mythic pieces in *The Chalk Giants* and later Gollancz collections. 'The Passing of the Dragons' itself is one of the best ecological hard-sf stories. This collection may be very difficult to find, but it's much better than the British collections that cover the same period.

Are 1317 pages too many for a film director to write his autobiography (divided into *A Life in Movies* and *Million-Dollar Movies*)? Not if you're Michael Powell, one of the most entertaining figures in the history of cinema. You could whisk through these pages without drawing breath, and still think the story is too short. The trouble is (we are told darkly by some major figures from the British film industry) is that much of Powell's tale is fiction, and that Michael Powell was not a Nice Man. Who cares? It's entertaining fiction. The trouble with books like these is that they make you curse the difficulty of tracking down Michael Powell movies.

I began a project of reading and re-reading the works of Janet Frame, another of my prime candidates for the Nobel Prize for Literature. Until now I haven't got much beyond *Owls Do Cry* (disappointing on a second reading) and *You Are Now Entering the Human Heart*, a compendium of Frame's better short fiction. Most stories are well written, but only 'Snowman, Snowman' (see my 'Favourite Short Stories' list) makes this an essential volume.

1994
FAVOURITE SHORT STORIES

1 'A Small, Good Thing' (Raymond Carver; *Where I'm Calling From: The Selected Stories*). **2 'Elephant'** (Raymond Carver; *Where I'm Calling From*). **3 'Snowman, Snowman'** (Janet Frame; *You Are Now Entering the Human Heart*). **4 'The Ragthorn'** (Robert Holdstock and Garry Kilworth; *A Whisper of Blood*). **5 'The Moose Church'** (Jonathan Carroll; *A Whisper of Blood*). **6 'Scrapings'** (Garry Disher; *Love Lies Bleeding: Crimes for a Summer Christmas 5*). **7 'One Last Zoom at the Buzz Bar'** (Alison M. Goodman; *The Pattern Maker*). **8 'What's in Alaska?'** (Raymond Carver; *Where I'm Calling From*). **9 'Errand'** (Raymond Carver; *Where I'm Calling From*). **10 'Cathedral'** (Raymond Carver; *Where I'm Calling From*). **11 'Boxes'** (Raymond Carver; *Where*

I'm Calling From). **12 'Put Yourself in My Shoes'** (Raymond Carver; *Where I'm Calling From*). **13 'The Lordly Ones'** (Keith Roberts; *The Lordly Ones*). **14 'Rand, Rat and the Dancing Man'** (Keith Roberts; *The Chalk Giants*). **15 'The Walk'** (Greg Egan; *The Pattern Maker*). **16 'An Empty Wheelhouse'** (Sean McMullen; *Metaworlds*).

It's happened again. The Short Stories list is more competitive than the Books or Novels lists. I *like* short stories. I like narrative, and I like compression of language. Poems provide the latter, but not often the former. Novels provide the former, but not often enough the latter. To be a fine writer of short stories is a great and glorious achievement. Perhaps that's why almost nobody can earn a living doing it.

So ignore the placings, and search out any of these.

As I've said, I've already reviewed the Carver stories in the previous *TMR*. 'A Small, Good Thing' is the story that Robert Altman chose as the backbone of his film *Short Cuts*. Study the way Altman ends the section based on 'A Small, Good Thing' (the astonished face of the baker, played by Lyle Lovett) and the way Carver ends the story, and you see why Carver was becoming better and better in his last years, whereas Altman largely misses the point of Carver's work (which is compassion and compression).

On the other hand, and to give Altman his due, Carver never wrote anything quite as good as the Jack Lemmon character who is interpolated into the film's hospital scene.

'Snowman, Snowman' is based on a fantasy premise: it gives the thoughts of a snowman from the time he/she is built until the sun destroys it. (Since it was written many years ago, I don't doubt if the title has anything to do with heroin.) The fantasy idea is a framework for a prose poem, which I found as enjoyable as any poem I've read. This collection might not be still available, but Frame's short stories are often reprinted in new collections.

'The Ragthorn' is pure can't-stop-reading narrative: vengeance, murder, the lot, in a well-defined medieval setting. Would I spoil it if I said that it gives the reader a similar chill to that given by the ending of the first *Vanishing* film? Didn't this story win the World Fantasy Award? It's not often I agree with awards.

'The Moose Church' reappears as the first few pages of Carroll's novel *From the Teeth of Angels*. That doesn't invalidate it as a chilling story about obsession.

I can't describe Garry Disher's 'Scrapings' because, although it has a firm story structure, it depends for its effect on a claustrophobic style that strands the reader (and main character) in a warped, dangerous Venice. Disher is one of a small number of Australian writers who can craft taut tales of unease without losing control of either style or narrative.

There have been some great examples of time-paradox stories in the sf field, and Alison Goodman's 'One Last Zoom at the Buzz Bar' should be added to the list. Also, it has the vigour of the best Generation X stories. A mad, dangerous romp; a lot of fun.

'The Lordly Ones' is Keith Roberts's lovely nutty story about a simple lad who is left to guard a toilet block after the End of the World as We Know It. Of course, he doesn't know it's a toilet block, that it needs guarding, or that it's the End of the World. What *we* know we must guess from stray bits of information. This story has some of the impact of 'Flowers for Algernon' without any of the sentimentality.

'Rand, Rat and the Dancing Man' is one of the far-future visions that make up *The Chalk Giants*. It is so original that I can't describe it, so I won't. Keep looking for this book.

'An Empty Wheelhouse' is one of a number of classic sf stories that Sean McMullen keeps turning out, seemingly without honour outside Australia. Wake up, you people in London and New York. 'An Empty Wheelhouse' is a self-contained story that is necessary reading as a preface to Sean's novels *Voices in the Light* and *Mirrorsun Rising*.

1994
FAVOURITE FILMS

1 *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (directed by John Ford; 1962). **2 *The Unforgiven*** (John Huston; 1960). **3 *The Wages of Fear*** (Henri-Georges Clouzot; 1952). **4 *Truly, Madly, Deeply*** (Anthony Minghella; 1991). **5 *Oliver Twist*** (David Lean; 1948). **6 *Shadows and Fog*** (Woody Allen; 1992). **7 *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*** (Woody Allen; 1982). **8 *The Card*** (Ronald Neame (1952). **9 *Million Pound Note*** (Ronald Neame; 1953). **10 *Tiger Bay*** (J. Lee Thompson; 1959). **11 *The Witches*** (Nicholas Roeg; 1989). **12 *The Music Lovers*** (Ken Russell; 1971).

If I gave a rank order to *all* the films I saw in 1994, I would give a completely different list. For instance, 1994 gave me my first chance in thirty years to see Roger Corman's *Little Shop of Horrors*, my favourite funny film. My own rules stop me listing it. First and second would be, of course, Orson Welles' *The Trial* and *Othello*. That Astor double bill was our best night at the cinema.

Other wonderful films I returned to in 1994 included Vincente Minnelli's *Two Weeks in Another Town* (seen most recently in 1966), Hamer's *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, which I could easily see again every year, Lean's *Great Expectations* (ditto), and Altman's *Brewster McCloud* (which seemed much better than when I saw it first in the mid seventies).

The tap of new movies has been turned off. Classic movies have almost disappeared from free-to-air television. They've been bought by the new pay television companies. Nobody wants pay tv, but it's destroying regular television anyway. The blockbuster movies have also been caught up by pay tv.

1994 saw the advent of VCR to the Gillespie–Cochrane household (thanks, Dick Jenssen), but I still haven't joined a video library. I'm part of a small group of people who watch movies on laser disc at a monthly meeting. Many of these films are old favourites rather than new acquaintances. And I don't get to the movies much.

So the 1994 list is odd:

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance is one of those classic movies that I've missed each time it's been on tv. But thanks to the new VCR, I caught it this time. This film is both a legend and about legend-making. Everybody is superb, especially Jimmy Stewart as the reluctant hero and Lee Marvin in a wonderful send-up of all his other bad-man roles. Perfect script. Great black-and-white photography. John Ford's direction. What more could one want from a movie?

In his autobiography, John Huston lists *The Unforgiven* as the only one of his movies that he dislikes (mainly because of the difficulties of making it). Perhaps he should have watched it again. No relation to the

recent big-budget Gene Hackman film also called *The Unforgiven*, it's as much of a classic western as any Ford film, but it lacks Ford's amused view of life, and replaces it with hard-headed asperity. Its subject, racism, can't have endeared it to audiences in 1960. Ordinary Americans are shown as bigots, the Native Americans are shown as the good guys, even when they are driven to attack the main (white) characters, and Audrey Hepburn gets to be a Native American princess. Burt Lancaster is at his best. The colour photography, shown on Channel Seven in a restored print, is spectacular.

The Wages of Fear is the most famous nail-biting film of all time, but the reviews give the idea that this is because of the question: 'Will the nitroglycerine explode or not?' A film cannot ride on one gimmick, and *The Wages of Fear*, shown complete for the first time, proves to be a complex mixture of dirty politics, fragile human characters, and a willingness of the director to torture the viewer almost beyond bearing. And the ending remains hard to take, even if you know it's inevitable.

Truly Madly Deeply is one of the few movies that might have done some good in the world. Say that you've lost your wife, husband or lover, and you watch this film on Sunday night television. You find yourself almost prostate with grief, along with actor Juliet Stevenson, in one of the truly great movie performances. And then you're astonished and delighted when the dead spouse returns as an all-too-solid ghost. And then you ask yourself: do you *really* want him or her back? Wouldn't that cripple your new life in some way? *Truly Madly Deeply* reminds me of Bill Forsyth's films because of its ability to turn grief into giddy humour. Is the triumph in the movie-making? No. It's all a bit pedestrian, like most British films. In the script? Not entirely. This is a film created by the total absorption of great British actors (Stevenson, Alan Rickman and Bill Douglas) determined to make this experience convincing. This is not the *best* movie of any year, but it's my own private delight of the nineties.

Oliver Twist is classic British cinema — but since it's David Lean during his best period, it's a lot better than mere 'British cinema'. This is blood-boiling stuff, with astonishing black-and-white photography and passionate performances. It doesn't seem to cut any corners from the original story, but to me it improves on Dickens's novel.

Shadows and Fog was breathtakingly beautiful to watch, with its modern black-and-white photography and Wellesian sense of menace. If it's not quite convincing, it's only because Woody Allen is so obviously paying tribute to the German Expressionists, Welles and *film noir*. If it had appeared in 1950, it would have been a genuine classic. But the script is interesting, and the performances fine. Not bad for a fake classic.

A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy is a tribute to Ingmar Bergman, but Woody Allen gets Bergman right. (So does Bergman occasionally, as in *The Magic Flute*.) The comedy is not as important as the sense of magic that occurs as Allen takes colour cameras out into the glories of upstate New York in the middle of summer. In this and *Shadows and Fog* you can turn off the sound and still enjoy the film. Like *Shadows and Fog*, this turns into a fantasy film.

Ronald Neame is an underrated British director. Given the chance, he could make good British equivalents of the American wacky comedy (*Million Pound Note*, starring Gregory Peck with a British cast), but he could also make a film like *The Card*, whimsical British screen comedy at its best. Alec Guinness, in his most endearing role, is a likable rogue who gets to the top by being interesting while everybody around him is boring. This must have been refreshing message in 1952's grey Britain.

If Britain was grey in 1952, it became grim by 1959, to judge from J. Lee Thompson's *Tiger Bay*. In Australia, this was noticed mainly because of a burning performance from pre-adolescent Hayley Mills. Film historians should go back to it, noting that it predates the English film renaissance by three years, and stands up better than most Hollywood films of the late 1950s.

For those who puzzled their way through *The Man Who Fell to Earth* or winced their way through *Don't Look Now*, *The Witches* shows what Nicholas Roeg can do when he isn't being pretentious. No punches are pulled in telling this Roald Dahl story of witches who like to kidnap children. Anjelica Huston is the most vivid witch in movies since Margaret Hamilton, and the scene where the members of the witches' convention rip off their disguises is worth waiting for.

I know people who violently dislike Ken Russell's films, and especially *The Music Lovers*. But then, such people are so literal-minded that they think that *The Music Lovers* is meant to be a biopic about Tchaikovsky. Characters with names like 'Tchaikovsky' and 'Madame von Meck' appear in this film, and lots of Tchaikovsky music is played in the background, but actually *The Music Lovers* is the product of a particularly lurid Ken Russell dream. If I had dreams like this, I'd be making movies too.

They are the films on the ranked list. Slipping off the list are a large number of documentaries that I saw during 1994, mainly on SBS. Most of them are not 'great films', but a few of them are memorable:

- ***Sunny Stories***, Ken Howard's ingenious biography of Enid Blyton.
- ***Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt***, an unexpectedly moving documentary (because I thought I had heard all the stories) about a wide variety of AIDS sufferers whose names are now on panels in the Quilt. (Directors: Robert Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman).
- ***John Lee Hooker***, Tony Knox's affectionate biography of the Grand Old Man of Blues, shows that he's also become the Grumpy Old Man of Blues.
- ***The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl***, in which Leni refuses to apologise for anything, tells how she made Those Films (which I still haven't seen), and now goes scuba diving in her eighties. She also has a few verbal stoushes with her interviewer and is very funny.
- ***Loudon Wainwright: One Man Guy***, made by a Dutch team led by Blam Splunteren, is my favourite of the doccos I saw in 1994, because Loudon is one of my favourite people in the world. Not that I would actually want to be a friend of his; I might end up in one of his songs. Loudon sparring verbally with his daughter and son (and losing) is a high point of this film. Who'd want to be Loudon's son and have 'Rufus is a Tit Man' sung about you for the rest of your life?
- ***Joe Cocker: Have a Little Faith*** (Julian Cardan and Margaret Flower) has Joe's old dad sitting in his tiny Sheffield parlour telling tales about Joe's naughty childhood. Joe exposes all his warts, and in turn he's shown as this funny snuffly bird, looking nearly as old as his dad, but who can still raise the roof at the Palais. Joe's one of the last of

the great rockers; it's nice to see a film that does well by him instead of indulging in publicity crap.

The worst documentary I've seen (in 1994 or ever) was nothing but a series of video clips about, of all people, ***The Kronos Quartet.*** These people ain't gonna tell you nothin' about nothin'. They pose well in cool clothing.

1994
FAVOURITE POPULAR CDs

1 ***The Silent Majority: Terry Allen's Greatest Missed Hits*** (Terry Allen; Fate). **2** ***Smokin' the Dummy*** (Terry Allen & Panhandle Mystery Band; Fate). **3** ***Career Moves*** (Loudon Wainwright III; Charisma). **4** ***Spinning Around the Sun*** (Jimmie Dale Gilmore; Elektra). **5** ***Outward Bound*** (Sonny Landreth (BMG/Zoo). **6** ***A Bigger Piece of Sky*** (Robert Earl Keen Jr; Sugar Hill). **7** ***John Prine*** (John Prine; Atlantic). **8** ***Bloodlines*** (Terry Allen; Fate). **9** ***Jericho*** (The Band; Pyramid). **10** ***Live MCMXCIII*** (Velvet Underground; Sire (2 CDs)). **11** ***Sweet Relief: A Benefit for Victoria Williams*** (Various artists; Chaos). **12** ***Achtung Baby*** (U2 (Island). **13** ***Watching the Dark*** (Richard Thompson; Hannibal (3 CDs)). **14** ***Across the Borderline*** (Willie Nelson; Columbia). **15** ***Unplugged*** (Rod Stewart; Warner Bros). **16** ***Out of Time*** (REM; Warner Bros). **17** ***Low*** (David Bowie; EMI). **18** ***The Happy Club*** (Bob Geldof; Vertigo). **19** ***Pedal Steal/Rollback*** (Terry Allen; Fate). **20** ***Old Testaments and New Revelations*** (Kinky Friedman; Fruit of the Loom).

Since I buy several hundred CDs per year, and most of them cost about $30 each, I choose carefully what I buy. If I choose my CDs carefully, it stands to reason that my final list of 'CDs that should be in my Top 10' will run to 100 items. And that's what happened.

Which means that, despite the rank order, the items in this Top 20 are about equal.

Musically my heart is not here, but occupies an arc that stretches from Austin, Texas through New Orleans to somewhere north of Memphis, Tennessee. How that arc also includes New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and London I don't know, but I have a flexible notion of geography.

Terry Allen and Loudon Wainwright could contest the King of Sardonic Humour award if ever they met, or even knew of each other. Terry Allen might just have the edge. I bought *Lubbock (on Everything)* a few years ago. That's still Terry Allen's best CD, and has just been re-released. The people at Reading's, Carlton, were able to get me the rest of Allen's CDs. They're all about equally good, but *The Silent Majority* and *Smokin' the Dummy* are just that bit funnier than the rest. When you hear Terry Allen for the first time, you think you're listening to just another Texas down-home singer — until you listen to the lyrics. Terry Allen fires his shots widely, and hits lots of targets. Song titles include 'Advice to Children', 'Big Ol White Boys' and a zany version of 'Home on the Range'.

Loudon Wainwright III is another master of entertaining bad taste. *Career Moves* is the live album that every good singer deserves, but rarely gets: a concert CD that runs as a continuous experience, with all the emotional highs and lows of performance left intact. The program includes mainly songs from the last ten years, but also has 'The Swimming Song' and 'The Man Who Couldn't Cry' from the early albums, and the delirious 'Acid Song', that I've heard several times in concert, but which has been (I guess) judged to be unrecordable until now.

Jimmie Dale Gilmore is a great Texan singer, with a high, moaning voice, full of sorrow and angst and loneliness and all those other good things you get in vintage Texas music. *Spinning Around the Sun* is his best album yet, except for *The Flatlanders*, which he recorded with Joe Ely and Butch Hancock in the early seventies. (*The Flatlanders* keeps appearing under different names.)

Sonny Landreth is a brilliant New Orleans-style slide guitarist. He also sings well, and composes some great songs, but mainly I listen to his CDs for that guitar wail. *Outward Bound* is his best so far. Very bayou. Very rock and roll.

Robert Earl Keen Jr is not as powerful a singer or as fine an instrumentalist as Landreth, but he knows how to write a classic song. 'Corpus Christi Bay' is the best 'two drifters' song I've heard for awhile, and 'Jesse with the Long Hair', a clever Dylan-like story ballad, has already been covered by other performers. (So who *did* shoot the banker?)

John Prine was the first and one of the best of the 'new Bob Dylans' that Loudon Wainwright mentions on his album *History*. Prine even sang like Dylan for most of his career. But there is a gentle, wistful streak in Prine that has never allowed him to break into the ranks of the legendary singer-songwriters. His best album remains the first, *John Prine*, which includes 'Paradise', a song I find hard to get out my head.

The Band has lost three members since it split up in 1977, one to defection and two to death. Yet when the remaining members got the show back on the road, adding Jim Weider, Randy Ciarlante and Richard Bell, the old magic returned. *Jericho* is one of those CDs that starts off sounding tired, but quickly gathers pace, ending with six of the best songs these people have ever recorded ('Move to Japan', a satirical rocker, 'Amazon (River of Dreams)', a long instrumental that could have kept going forever, 'Stuff You Gotta Watch', one of the best Muddy Waters songs, Willie Dixon's 'Same Thing', and 'Shine a Light' and 'Blues Stay Away from Me').

Another band that nobody thought would ever reform was Velvet Underground. The impossible happened in 1993, and the tape recorders were rolling. As soon as they had done a few comeback concerts, three of them fell out with Lou Reed (surprise) and VW split up again. And then Sterling Morrison died recently. Thank the musical gods for hi fi concert recordings like *Live MCMXCIII*. Watch what you're buying. This appeared in both a single-CD and double-CD format. Make sure you buy the double CD.

Many of the CDs I've bought recently have been tribute albums in which a bunch of ordinary-to-good performers get together to touch the forelock to some rock singer they can't possibly emulate. So what was *Sweet Relief*? A tribute album to a singer who had never recorded? Who was Victoria Williams? It turns out that she has been a well-known songwriter for some time. When she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis a few years ago, her friends helped her out by recording *Sweet Relief*. Brilliant songs. Victoria Williams rallied, and has since made four CDs of her own. She has a high voice that sounds like a magpie on acid, and only recently has she made herself an adequate singer of her own songs (on the recent *Loose*). To see how good her songs are, sample some of the tracks from *Sweet Relief*, especially Pearl Jam doing 'Crazy Mary', Soul Asylum on 'Summer of Drugs' and Lou Reed on 'Tarbelly and Featherfoot'. Sylvia Reed and Kelley Walker produced the CD.

Gillespie giving four stars to a *pop* album? By *U2*? Especially an album that sold umpty-umpteen million

copies? Just did it to surprise you. *Achtung Baby* is a great rock album, even if U2 use (pity help us) synthesisers. This has some of the best riffs of recent years. It's good and loud, it's not slick, and you don't get tired of it.

If I were Marc Ortlieb or quite a few other *SFC/TMR* readers I would put *Watching the Dark*, the Richard Thompson three-CD retrospective, top of the heap. But if I were Marc Ortlieb, etc., I would have most of these tracks already on CD. (I have most of them on LP.) There are a few new tracks, especially some fine concert performances, but the chief use of *Watching the Dark* is to remind you how good the man is, or could be.

Since Frank Sinatra grew too old to be let out at night, Willie Nelson has become the best song stylist in the world. No voice, but what style! In *Across the Borderline*, lavish production covers up most of Nelson's style, but on the other hand he chooses some good songs: John Hiatt's 'The Most Unoriginal Sin', Peter Gabriel's 'Don't Give Up' (duet with Sinead O'Connor!), 'Heartland' (a new song by Bob Dylan), the great Ry Cooder–John Hiatt–Jim Dickinson ballad 'Across the Borderline', and best of all, two of Willie Nelson's own songs ('She's Not for You' and 'Still is Still Moving to Me'). Rich stuff, which didn't quite push Willie back into the Top Ten. Sacked from Sony/Columbia, he's now recording for his own small label, and sounding better than ever.

I know everybody has done an *Unplugged* album — and where's Neil Young's on the list? (No. 21, since you ask.) Rod Stewart's is the *Unplugged* I love because it has a magic moment when Rod announces the arrival of Ronnie Wood, and they launch into 'Cut Across Shorty', and the Faces are back together again. I sobbed like a drain. Put the Faces back together again, Rod. Make it all happen. Let Greatness Return to the Earth. (The drummer is fabulous on this album, but uncredited. Did Ronnie play drums as well as guitar?)

REM's *Out of Time* is a big-selling pop album that, like U2's recent efforts, I find irresistible. Bring back the mandolins, Michael; an *Out of Time* beats a *Monster* every time.

Has it taken me nearly two decades to discover David Bowie's *Low*? Yep. And I discovered it only because of Philip Glass's use of the same material in one of his recent classical CDs. Blame the reviewers in the seventies; they all agreed that the albums in the *Low* trilogy were unapproachable, wildly experimental, unlistenable . . . you know what reviewers are like. If Bowie were still recording music as fresh, inventive and listenable as this, he wouldn't be searching for a hit record.

When you hear Bob Geldof's *The Happy Club* (and *The Vegetarians of Love* from the year before) you can't believe that he's considered to be down on his luck. There aren't many British singer-songwriters who can write songs as tuneful as these, and the lyrics are funny and perceptive. If this CD had been given some airplay, justice might have been done, and Sir Bob would have been on top again.

Kinky Friedman sounds a lot like Terry Allen, but he's more wayward in choosing material for his recent CDs. When he gives himself a great hook, such as 'Asshole from El Paso' or 'They Don't Make Jews Like Jesus Anymore', he produces the best sardonic songs around. But he's careless. *Old Testaments and New Revelations* is not a new album, and it's not a 'best of'. Mainly it features rambling alternate versions of familiar songs. Not all of them are good songs, although some of them are his best. I just wish he could find a way to re-release his best albums from the 1970s. Or perhaps he should stick to writing crime novels. The Kinkster's the first to admit that his books sell better than his music.

1994
FAVOURITE CLASSICAL CDs

1 Beethoven: *Complete Sonatas* (Daniel Barenboim; EMI (10 CDs)). **2 Schubert: String Quartet No. 14 in D minor (*Death and the Maiden*)/Beethoven: String Quartet No. 16 in F major** (Hagen Quartet; DG). **3 Mahler: Symphony No. 9** (Leonard Bernstein cond. Concertgebouw Orch. of Amsterdam; DG (2 CDs)). **4 Mahler: Symphony No. 9/'Adagio' from Symphony No. 10** (Maurice Abravanel cond. Utah Symphony Orchestra; Vanguard (2 CDs). **5 J. S. Bach: *Sonatas and Partitas*** (Itzhak Perlman; EMI (2 CDs)). **6 *Kathleen Ferrier Edition*** (Decca Ovation (10 CDs)). **7 Mahler: Symphony No. 4/Adagietto from Symphony No. 5/Sibelius: Symphony No. 2/Glinka: 'Jota aragonesa'/Rimsky-Korsakov: *Tsar Saltan* suite/ Tchaikovsky: 'Andante cantabile'/Schubert: *Rosamunde* overture** (Paul Kletzki cond. Philharmonia Orch. and Royal Philharmonic Orch.; EMI (2 CDs)). **8 Beethoven: Symphonies Nos. 4 and 5** (Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt; Decca)). **9 Schubert: *The Symphonies*** (Nikolaus Harnoncourt & Royal Concertgebouw Orch.; Teldec (4 CDs)). **10 Beethoven: *Missa Solemnis/ Fantasy for Piano, Chorus and Orchestra/* Haydn: *'Theresia' Mass*** (Leonard Bernstein cond. New York Philharmonic Orch.; Sony (2 CDs)). **11 *Favourite Cello Concertos* (Haydn Nos. 1 and 2/ Boccherini/Schumann/ Saint-Saëns/ Monn/ Dvorak/ Elgar)** (Jacqueline du Pré; EMI (3 CDs)). **12 Beethoven: Piano Trio in D ('Ghost')/Piano Trio in B flat ('Archduke')** (Beaux Arts Trio; Philips). **13 Elisabeth Schwarzkopf: *Schwarzkopf Edition*** (EMI (5 CDs)). **14 Nathan Milstein: *The Art of Nathan Milstein: Capitol Recordings 1955–1966*** (EMI (6 CDs)). **15 Ives: String Quartet No. 1 (*From the Salvation Army*)/String Quartet No. 2/'Holding Your Own'/Barber: String Quartet** (Emerson Quartet; DG).

Here is a line-up of No. 1 Favourites — Beethoven, Bernstein, Barenboim, etc. — pushing each other off the bench. The only way I can talk about them is to explain why each one did not make it to No. 1 — apart from the CD that actually did get there:

The treasured No. 1, the Giant Gillespie Rosette, goes to Barenboim's first version of the complete Beethoven piano sonatas because collectively this is the best piano playing I've ever heard or am ever likely to hear, and many of the versions (say, of the No. 31 and No. 32) are so ethereal and astonishing that they could never be improved upon. You'll need to order this set; I've only seen it in a shop once, which is when I bought it. (Barenboim's second recordings of Beethoven sonatas on DG might be as good, but I haven't heard any of them.)

The Hagen Quartet's version of Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* quartet and Beethoven's last quartet didn't get to No. 1 only because it was one CD against Barenboim's ten. If it is possible to play the Schubert better than this, I can't imagine how good that would be. And the Hagens' playing of the Beethoven is the only satisfactory playing I've ever heard of one of his quartets (except for some beaten-up old LPs we have, played by the unknown Yale Quartet). Why won't Musica Viva bring the Hagen Quartet to Australia?

I can't offer any excuse for robbing Bernstein's last

recording of the Mahler's Ninth of No. 1 except for the fact that the other two snuck in ahead of it. I already know how wonderful the symphony is; it's that extra Bernstein attention to previously unnoticed details that lifts this above the others. Also, DG's recording technology is supernaturally precise.

Abravanel's version of Mahler's Ninth would have been the Record of the Year in most other years — but Bernstein's is just that little bit more extraordinary. There is no definitive version of a Mahler symphony. Listen to Bernstein's and Abravanel's recordings one after the other, and you feel that you have experienced two different, equally moving symphonies.

1993 was the year when Vanguard re-released all the the great Abravanel/Utah Symphony Orchestra Mahler recordings from the 1960s. They give no evidence that they were recorded nearly thirty years ago, and several of the interpretations — the Third, the Sixth, the Seventh and the Ninth, recorded in the Mormon Tabernacle — are among the greatest ever recorded. They've been released recently in a cheap edition.

Perlman's version of the Bach Partitas and Sonatas for Solo Violin is the finest I've heard (apart from Casals', of course). Their magnificence is not merely a matter of Perlman's dexterity, although that's awe-inspiring. It's more that Perlman treats these ultimate violin pieces as human documents, instead of difficult showpieces. There's something sweet and alive in the middle of Perlman's playing that other violinists delete when they approach Bach.

The only reason why the ten-CD *Kathleen Ferrier Edition* is not No. 1 is that many of the transfers from the 1940s recordings are very shrill. I get squawks from my speakers from some of them, and that should not happen. Some engineer wasted an opportunity to do this set as well as possible. Ferrier is the greatest singer ever recorded. A set like this should have included her radio performance of *Orfeo ed Eurydice* instead of the much inferior abridged studio version. Also, it should have included her other definitive recording, the Bruno Walter version of Mahler's *Song of the Earth*, made not long before Ferrier died in 1953. But if you don't have any Ferrier in the collection, start with this ten-CD set.

I'm cheating on my own system by including the Kletzki double-CD set. If I'd included other CD releases of music I already had (such as the Muti four-CD set of Cherubini Masses or Abravanel's version of Mahler's Third) the list would have been quite different. The Mahler Fourth on the Kletzki Profile is the version I've been looking for ever since CDs became available. It was worth the wait. Despite the hissy transfer by EMI, the delicate, swooning playing of Kletzki and the RPO makes all the other versions (even Solti's; even Tennstedt's) seem a bit plodding. (Hiss to EMI; why can't they take the trouble to do digital remastering properly every time, instead of only half the time?)

But the reason I feel justified in including this CD in the Favourites list is all the other stuff on it. Even the lollipops (the Glinka, Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky) are treated with passion and respect. The Kletzki version of the Sibelius Second is one of the great recordings, and makes a fitting companion to a recent coupling of his versions of the First and Third. Few people seem to remember Kletzki these days. The CD's liner notes explain that he never had an orchestra of his own, and he made his best recordings just before the great days of the 1960s. But his recordings should be sought, bought and treasured.

When I first met Lee Harding at the beginning of 1968 he told me that Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt was the greatest interpreter of the Beethoven symphonies, 'especially in the slow movement of the Fourth, which everybody else gets wrong'. Lee knew his music then, and still does. In 1993 the Decca vaults finally disgorged the Schmidt-Isserstedt version of the Fourth and lo! it is as Lee Harding foretold: the slow movement of the Fourth is one of the great listening experiences. (To give him his due, Harnoncourt's playing of the same movement on his recent set of Beethoven symphonies is nearly as good.) Schmidt-Isserstedt's version of the Fifth, by comparison, is unexceptional. Also buy Schmidt-Isserstedt's version of the Ninth, which is now available on Award at $10.

The only reason the Harnoncourt set of the Schubert symphonies is not No. 1 is that the Schubert symphonies are just a bit boring. In Harnoncourt's hands they become exciting, and one wonders why so many earlier conductors have made them so particularly boring. The symphonies were not Schubert's strength, but — and here's the point of a truly great recording — Harnoncourt treats them as if they were.

The only reason Bernstein's version of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* is not No. 1 is that I have a favourite version already: the 1962 Klemperer version. (That is my Favourite Classical Record of All Time.) Bernstein is the only conductor who comes near to the zest, power and sheer enjoyability of Klemperer. Most other conductors treat the *Missa Solemnis* with Great Reverence, which is a Terrible Mistake.

Bernstein had an affinity for the Haydn masses. His performance of Haydn's 'Theresia' Mass can hardly be described as 'filler': worth buying even if you don't like the *Missa Solemnis*.

The only reason Jacqueline du Pré's versions of the great cello concertos is not No. 1 is because I have quite a few of them on other recordings. For instance, one of EMI's best ten CDs is the coupling of the du Pré/Barbirolli version of the Elgar Cello Concerto with Janet Baker singing *Sea Pictures*. Jacqueline du Pré is the best cellist ever recorded; certainly the only one you can pick if you hear only a few notes on radio. If you don't have any or many of these performances, rush out to buy this set.

I hadn't bought the Beaux Arts Trio versions of the Beethoven Piano Trios because somebody told me they were not as good as hearing the Beaux Arts Trio play them in concert! Strange that I did not make the right reply: But doesn't that still make them the best? The Beaux Arts Trio stamp is one of the few absolute guarantees in music. I should have bought their version of the 'Ghost' and 'Archduke' Trios years ago. What a feast.

After Kathleen Ferrier, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf is my second favourite singer of the century. I had great hopes when I bought the *Schwarzkopf Edition* that I would find all kinds of lost treasures. I had reckoned without EMI's flatfooted marketing department. Most of the CDs are filled with music I have already somewhere in the collection. The only genuine discoveries are some delicious 'Encores' (such as her incomparable version of Martini's 'Plaisir d'amour') and a third version (to add to her famous Ackermann and Szell recordings) of Strauss's *Four Last Songs*. Karajan accompanies her on this newly discovered recording. Unless you are a Hugo Wolff fan, which I'm not, the rest of the set shows signs of reaching into the bin. One day EMI will do justice to Schwarzkopf, but it hasn't happened yet.

The only reason why *The Art of Nathan Milstein* is not No. 1 is that, again, EMI has done the dirty on one of its great stars. Let's all have a nice big hiss at EMI. They

seem to have chosen randomly from Milstein's great performances over a long period of time, then not bothered to do a good job of remastering the older recordings. Some of the versions sound quite bizarre, although the listener can discern distantly that they are fine performances. There is a great legacy of Milstein recordings from his last years, and someday they might be collected onto a worthy CD set.

The only reason why any version of Ives' quartets misses out on No. 1 is that the version is not as good as the music demands. It pains me to say that the Emerson Quartet is not up to scratch on this recording — but I've heard how these quartets should sound, on a scratchy, long-out-of-print LP on Turnabout by the Kohon Quartet. Played by them, the Ives Quartets are as good as the Bartók Quartets. When you're listening to the Emersons, you can hear how good the music is, but never quite catch the moment of revelation.

— 31 October 1995