

CONSUMING PASSION

by SIMON FRITH

Sex sells music, music sells jeans...

THE music press ad for the Scorpions' LP offended so many people that even the Advertising Standards Authority took notice. The ad was modified, but the original picture still stares down from the walls of most record shops: a couple, dressed expensively, are on their way in back of a car to a fancy dinner or ball. The man has put his hand on the woman's breast and, as he removes it, a big wadge of chewing gum comes too (in the black and white newspaper version the gum looks like flesh, which makes the image even more unpleasant). On the back of the album sleeve the couple still stare intently at us, but with huge smiles now. They hold a photo of the Scorpions where the gum had been. The woman's left breast is bare.

A nasty cover, sure enough, but typical of the Hipgnosis house style. Every picture tells a story and this one has to be unravelled. The message, the joke, comes from the double reference: boy-caught-feeling-up-girl/stars-in-a-car.

Petting pix conventionally connote the Fifties, rock 'n' roll, teenage culture. Hipgnosis have used this device before, for Fumble — that cover had the couple on a sofa, boy's hand slipping down girl's sweater — and all rock 'n' roll anthologies seem to use it. Car pix are equally success: but they connote success: we, the fans, get to admire our idols (like Abba, on their second LP) but only through the window. Their comfort is sealed against us.

Put these two images together and you get the Hipgnosis nudge: stylish seclusion is made a mockery by teenage behaviour. Beneath that cool dress is a lump of chewing gum! Behind that smoked glass is a couple fumbling! And we've caught them at it!!!

WHAT has all this to do with the Scorpions? On the surface, very little. The album is called "Love-drive", so there's a vague pun, but there's no obvious way in which the sleeve "expresses" the Scorpions' heavy metal style. But then, that wasn't its job.

Album covers aren't pictures of the music inside, they're advertisements for it. The Scorpions' cover is designed to get people to buy the record; it doesn't represent music, it represents consumption.

The couple in the picture are neither Scorpions nor Scorpion fans, but the sleeve as a whole implies that to buy the album is to enter a privileged, decadent, snook-cocking, male community. The back picture is actually the crucial one; the couple hold the Scorpions (just as we can), and we are drawn from gazing at them to gazing with them, safely (in the car-womb) defying respectability.

There are several books around now on sleeve design, but their concern is design as art or technique. They don't treat design as advertisement; they don't examine what different album cover designs mean. I haven't got space to pursue this line either, but I do know that sexual imagery is a crucial element in rock art: The Scorpions sleeve is



nothing special.

The straight use of soft porn (as in, say, garage calendars) is confined almost exclusively to soul records and pre-Rasta reggae, but most female musicians have been packaged at some stage in their careers as if they were as available for purchase as their music, and passive, plastic, female images have always been central to the selling of rock as something rebellious/liberated / glamorous / fun — just flip the pages of The Album Cover Album and see.

THE distinction between music and advertisement is currently more blurred than ever, as disco sells itself like perfume.

Popular sounds have always been quickly absorbed into commercials' language; the latest musical style gets used to endow all sorts of products with up-to-date-ness. Even punk has become an advertisers' tool — see the Lee Cooper ads — and the point is that all music can be emptied of its original cultural content, can stand for pure consumption.

It seems to me that the most recent sounds of pop have become the sounds of consumption much more quickly and completely than anything before. Every other TV ad now sounds as though it were scored by Mike Oldfield and produced by Frank Farian or Giorgio Moroder. What does it mean that Duckhams sell their motor oil with the help of reconstructed Kraftwerk?

And disco, almost overnight, has become the all-enveloping sign of leisure spending. It makes sense. Disco is a faceless form. It works not as communication but as function: it only makes sense in the act of consumption, when the consumer complete its logic. No wonder every other product wants to claim the same equation of purchase and fulfilment.

In this context, Hipgnosis' self-consciously sadistic sexism seems dated. Flip through the disco racks to see the current use of images of women — stretched, strained, available. In the Scorpions ad the sex/music connection has to be interpreted, and can still be resisted. In disco marketing, sexual and musical availability are sold as exactly the same thing.