NEW Madonna album never arrives alone. Around it is a cloud of video, side projects, tie-ins, personal appearances and random buzz that obscure all divisions between the artistic project and the promotion. So it is with "American Life" (Warner Brothers), Madonna's new album, which is to be released on Tuesday but can already be heard in its entirety at www.mtv.com. It has shown up along with various diversions:

• The video for "American Life," a replacement for the one Madonna withdrew as the United States went to war with Iraq.

• An exhibition of Madonna posing in somber video installations at Deitch Projects, a SoHo gallery.

• Madonna's latest pronouncements and past hits on VH1, MTV2 and MTV, which will have her performing in its studios on Tuesday.

• Madonna cursing fans who try to download her music free. She has introduced decoy versions of her new songs to file-sharing Web sites. Anyone hoping to listen to a track hears her annoyed voice instead, sneering, "What the [expletive] do you think you're doing?" — a recording that's bound to get a second life as a sample.

• And for comic relief, there's an appearance by Madonna as an uptight office worker seeking a roommate on the Thursday night episode of the NBC comedy "Will and Grace."
As she blankets the media yet again, Madonna is the exact opposite of a politician striving to stay "on message." Madonna's priority is to keep people watching whatever she does; she maintains a presence, not a message.

Her latter-day video clips tend to be only tangentially related to the underlying songs, and by the time an album and a video have been prepared for release, she is on to the next hair color, fashion statement or spiritual preference. In her previous video, for "Die Another Day," she flaunted Hebrew letters (one of the 72 kabalistic names of God, used for meditation on eliminating the ego) and wrapped one arm with tefillin (a boxlike leather case attached to a thong; it contains Scriptural passages and is worn by observant Jewish men during weekday morning prayer). In her new video, for "American Life," she insists, "I'm not a Christian and I'm not a Jew."

A few weeks ago, Madonna withdrew her original "American Life" video because, she said, she was worried that it might be misinterpreted during wartime. It had intercut a fashion show of camouflage fantasies with images of bombs and destruction, and it ended with Madonna tossing a grenade that was caught by a George W. Bush look-alike. He opened the top — it turned out to be a cigarette lighter and nonchalantly lighted a cigar.

Madonna told VH1 that the video, made before the war with Iraq, was meant to insist that viewers should "stop being distracted by all of your entertainment" and try to avert a war. Having the grenade turn out to be harmless was, she said, "wishful thinking, symbolically, that we could find a different way to deal with our conflicts with Iraq." But the video could also have been seen as a Bush endorsement (he could bravely defuse a grenade) or a callous equation of dancing and preening with bombings.

It was one brouhaha Madonna didn't want to incite. The replacement video shows her in a low-cut, form-fitting quasi-military khaki shirt, facing the camera and singing while various flags ripple behind her, ending with the American flag. Various nationalists may take offense at which flag goes with which lyrics, but it's a stretch to call the video controversial, as VH1 did with its premiere on Wednesday night. Meanwhile, what the video has to do with the song — a lament that material success hasn't satisfied her — remains a mystery. "I live the American dream," Madonna sings mournfully, going on to rap about soy latte, yoga class and nannies before saying, "I just realized that nothing is as it seems."

Despite the flag imagery and military-style stenciled letters of its cover, "American Life" is actually an album about the midlife crisis of a disillusioned star. In "I'm So Stupid," she sings: "I used to live in a tiny bubble, and I wanted to be like all the pretty people that were all around me/But now I know for sure that I was stupid." The album is one of Madonna's confessional works part of the line.
The music of "American Life" continues Madonna's collaboration with the ingenious French producer Mirwais Ahmadzai, who produced the album "Music" in 2000. It uses a similar mixture of acoustic guitar-picking, ticking drum machines and swooping, buzzing synthesizer lines. The guitar signals the sincerity of a singer-songwriter, while all the gizmos add the retro catchiness of the synth-pop music now being revived under the name electroclash.

"Music" had giddy moments along with pensive ones. On "American Life," the guitar and the minor chords that dominate the songs are the giveaways. This time around, Madonna has lost interest in being a sex symbol or a party girl; she just wants love and a chance to brood. The album's most danceable tune, "Nobody Knows Me," ponders thoughts like, "It's no good when you're misunderstood, but why should I care what the world thinks of me?"

Throughout "American Life," songs use distant echoes of early disco — beats and blips and phrases like "you make me feel" and "got to give it up" — not for fun but for introspection. What Madonna has got to give up, she tells herself in "Mother and Father," is the grief and rage at her mother's death that made her unable to love. It's one of the handful of songs on the album, along with "Die Another Day" and the love songs "Nothing Fails" and "Love Profusion," that manage to find sentiments other people might share within Madonna's overwhelming self-absorption.

She's clearly trying to be honest, even if it's painful. But too often, the album approaches the folkie psychobabble of songwriters like Jewel. In "X-Static Process," set to a simply plucked acoustic guitar, Madonna croons, "I always wished that I could find someone as beautiful as you, but in the process I forgot that I was special too." Just what Madonna needs on the way to eliminating the ego: a refresher in self-esteem.

"X-Static Process" is also the name of Madonna's collaboration with the fashion photographer Steven Klein, apparently because one of their sound-and-video installations at Deitch Projects uses vocal samples from the song. The installation, of slide and video tableaus, strains to revive the old extroverted Madonna who was so skilled at finding a nexus of sex, faith, exhibitionism and self-advertisement (related review, Page 36). In its largest piece, she's kneeling on a stage in a kind of glitter bondage hood as a wedding dress burns perpetually nearby and her voice is heard reciting scary passages from the Book of Revelations — almost rapping — above a slow thud. Elsewhere, she's tied to a pole and menaced by coyotes, or
contorted on a table with a leg behind her head (those yoga classes must work), or groveling on a dirty bed.

It's all very grim and serious, although the $350 catalog, printed on the art-world equivalent of paper towels, includes more close-ups and cheesecake. In a note in the catalog, Madonna writes, "X-Static Process isn't art — it isn't anything." Yes, it is. It's one more chance for Madonna to attract attention.