

Hark! The Pop Cash Register Rings

By HENRY EDWARDS

In order to capitalize on the holiday gift-buying season, many record companies save their biggest albums for release during the last month of the year. In December, record shops are packed with stacks of new disks by many of pop's most revered superstars. The following records are this year's offerings by pop biggies. Earnest endeavors by and large, they tend to demonstrate that sometimes talent and earnestness are still not enough.

THE BAND: Northern Lights-Southern Cross; Capitol ST 11440. Though featured on Bob Dylan's "Before the Flood" and "The Basement Tapes," "Northern Lights-Southern Cross" is The Band's first solo LP in more than two years and the first containing original material in more than four. The basic Band formula, determinedly rhythmic, country-flavored rock, is here high-

Henry Edwards frequently writes on pop music.

lighted by a series of lilting close harmonies. The quintet, however, has also created a number of gentler tunes that apply a touch of middle-of-the-road gloss to its calculatedly earthy sound. For the most part, this disk is a mere echo of the infectiousness of the Band's past musical achievements; most of it is downright lethargic.

JOHN DENVER: Rocky Mountain Christmas; RCA APL-1-1201. Bland John Denver singing bland versions of "Silver Bells," "Away in a Manger" and "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer"? This disk is only for dedicated goody-goodies. Bah, humbug!

EARTH, WIND & FIRE: Gratitude; Columbia PG 33694. Three sides of this two-record set are culled from recent concert appearances by this enormously popular nine-man "rock 'n' soul" outfit, while the fourth side is devoted to new studio material by the group. All of the music is carefully tooled, zestfully polished, relentlessly good-natured rhythmic

dance music, an amalgam of rhythm-and-blues, jazz and middle-of-the-road pop that the group gleefully shouts, croons, squeals and growls. There's showmanship galore here, but strip that showmanship away and one discovers that Earth, Wind & Fire's music is built around one persistently repeated chord—and not the world's most interesting chord either.

ARETHA FRANKLIN: You; Atlantic SD 18151. Slickly arranged and seamlessly produced, "You" is comprised of an innocuous collection of rhythm-and-blues tunes, ballads and items to dance to. "You" features Aretha, a queen of high vocal emotion, soars with her fervent gospel/blues approach as she blends notes from whispers to shouts and then back again. She deserves better material.

JIMI HENDRIX: Midnight Lightning; Reprise MS 2229. This is Hendrix's second posthumous LP, culled by producers Alan Douglas and Tony Bongiovi from nearly 1,000 hours of tape that was deposited by the Hendrix estate in a New Jersey warehouse after the superstar guitarist died five years ago. By adding new guitar, bass, drum and vocal lines to the carefully edited solo tracks, Douglas and Bongiovi have created a disk which is straightforward Hendrix rock-blues and essentially not very interesting. Of course, hear-

ing the guitarist produce an occasional biting, penetrating, compelling tune is always a pleasure. But much of this material might as well have been left in that warehouse.

ELTON JOHN: Rock of the Westies; MCA 2163. A diverting LP consisting mainly of straightforward rockers, "Rock of the Westies" arrives a mere five months after Elton John's last recording, "Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy." The rapid succession of these two disks demonstrates that for some rock superstars, making a substantial recording must be an easy, quick and painless process. Whether he is rasping intensely or singing merry high harmonies with himself, Elton makes it all look so easy that he could probably release another new LP next week with the same pleasing results.

JONI MITCHELL: The Hissing of Summer Lawns; Asylum 7E-1051. This disk gives the dominant impression of being inhabited by women who are "paper wives" with "paper kids" who "paper the walls to keep their gut reactions hid"; who are also given rooms "full of Chippendale/That nobody sits in"; and are told by men that "We walked on the moon/You be polite." These women who mimic the "tenderness" of "sentimental movies" have also been conditioned by the movies to respond favorably to men speaking "Brando-like

things."

Mitchell has refused to amplify these feminist perceptions with melody, and so they exist as nothing more or less than cocktail jazz-rock. Nebulous and pretentious, "The Hissing of Summer Lawns" eventually becomes numbing.

CAT STEVENS: Numbers; A & M SP 4555. Labeled a "Pythagorean Theory Tale," Cat Stevens's latest precocity deals with the planet Polygor "which exists to give numbers to the universe" and its nine leading denizens, members of a race called—what else—Polygons. These Polygons do such contemporary-sounding things as "groove on" sniffing a "healthy," odorless, "sterilized" substance called "ban-apple gas"; they also deal in such dime-store philosophy as "They were only mirrors you imagined in your mind/Now that you've got no place to go/And you stand alone/Know that there's just one place to be/And its in your soul, oh . . ." The determined whimsy of "Numbers" succeeds in diluting Stevens's punchy rhythms. Still, the composer's compelling vocal attack and his breathy baritone, in itself a powerfully percussive instrument, remain intact.

SLY STONE: High on You; Epic PE 33835. In the mid- and late-1960's Sly Stone's mating of rhythm-and-blues



David Gahr

Franklin—"queen of vocal emotion"

and psychedelic rock produced a showy amalgam that was not only dazzling in its own right but also capable of spawning such current supergroups as Earth, Wind & Fire. "High On You" finds Stone once again setting up

a throbbing pulsebeat that is mischievously spiced by edgy horn phrases, distorted guitar licks, sassy organ fills, squealing background vocals and flashy synthesizer jolts. Riding the crest of this festival of syncopation are

Stone's lead vocals. Even though the composer's vocal power is now seriously diminished—he sounds rather like a cartoon version of his former fiery self—this non-stop dance music is still a ferocious rhythmic onslaught.

NEIL YOUNG: Zuma; Reprise MS 2242. Reunited with Crazy Horse, the blunt, country-flavored rock group with whom he achieved a great deal of his early solo success, Neil Young applies his curious, quaking tenor to a series of his own compositions dealing with the "stupid girl" he "trusted" and with whom "he made his bets" that inevitably led to his dying "a thousand deaths." Pop yentas know that these elemental rock songs have been inspired by the dissolution of Young's relationship with actress Carrie Snodgrass. They also know that the affluent 29-year old superstar—much beloved both as a solo recording artist and as a member of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young (who join him on "Through My Sails," a haunting and enigmatic ballad that is the disk's final track)—is being autobiographical when he wails that "His life was filled with parasites/And countless idle threats." Unlucky in love, sponged upon by his friends, singing off-key while playing raunchy, country-flavored lead guitar (and occasionally missing notes in the process), Young's bleat is an adolescent wail with which adolescents of all ages can easily identify. ■