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Stereo Review®

RECORD OF THE YEAR AWARDS FOR 1980

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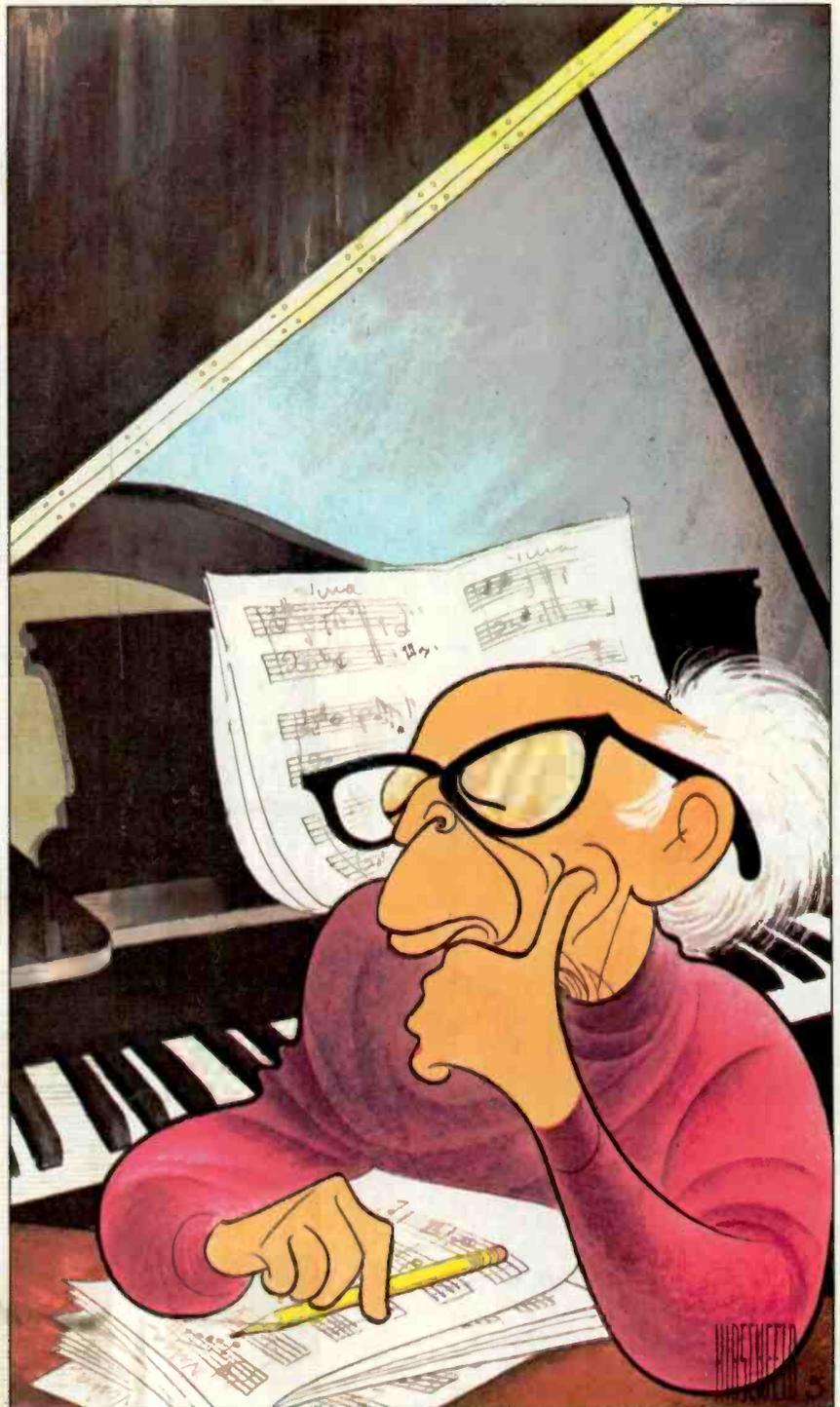
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INTERVIEW: Steely Dan

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Performance: **Good**
Recording: **Very good**

Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil made up one of the heavy-hitter songwriting teams in the Fifties/Sixties. Along with the Gerry Goffin/Carole King and Jeff Barry/Ellie Greenwich teams, they operated out of the Brill Building in New York, then the address of Tin Pan Alley. Mann is in his late forties now, and he is still a skilled songsmith and performer. That his new material is more in the night-club line should be no surprise—Neil Sedaka, another contemporary, has moved in the same direction. Carole King duets with Mann here on *You're the Only One* and *Slow Motion*, and Cynthia Weil is listed as executive producer, so the album is something of a class reunion. Nothing in it is surprising, but most of it is solid and enjoyable. *J.V.*

JONI MITCHELL: *Shadows and Light.* Joni Mitchell (vocals, guitar); vocal and instrumental accompaniment. *In France They Kiss on Main Street; Edith and the Kingpin; Coyote; Goodbye Pork Pie Hat; The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines; Woodstock; Amelia; Hejira; Black Crow; Dreamland;* and nine others. ASYLUM BB-704 two discs \$13.98, © BC5-704 \$13.98, © BT8-704 \$13.98.

Performance: **Joni jazz**
Recording: **Good remote**

Joni Mitchell was quoted as saying her work would never be the same after her collaboration with Charles Mingus. Some of us are wondering whether there will be more work of any sort; it's been a long time since "Mingus," and this double-size live album of "old" material seems mostly a showcase for the ensemble she put together for it. Actually, her work hasn't been "the same" since "The Hissing of Summer Lawns," wherein a sort of sound aesthetic started to shove the folk-song muse out of the spotlight. Most of the songs in this collection come from that album and later, although there are a few other things here, such as *Woodstock* and a guest shot by the Persuasions (Joni, by the way, does not sound very persuasive imitating Frankie Lyman).

The instrumentalists seem to be what makes this album distinct from those that introduced the various songs. Yet the arrangements aren't all that distinct; often what you have is Michael Brecker playing pretty close to the old Tom Scott lines on the sax and Jaco Pastorius, of course, playing a more active bass than anyone else did behind her. And, oh, yes, Joni plays an electric guitar instead of an acoustic one. There are some nice sounds, and it is a decent-enough product to put on the market, I suppose, but nothing is redefined, no great revelations occur. I assume that what she's really up to is either taking time off or working on a blockbuster. If you want a live Joni album, "Miles of Aisles" is a more interesting one. *N.C.*

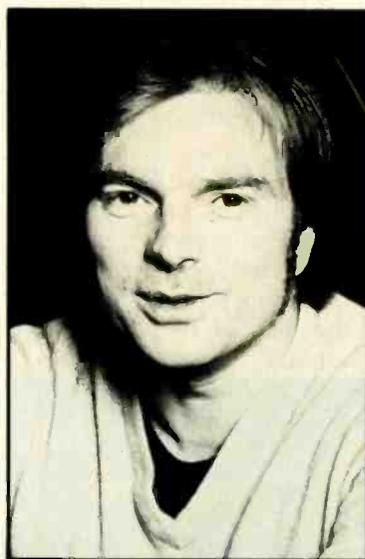
VAN MORRISON: *Common One.* Van Morrison (vocals); instrumental accompaniment. *Haunts of Ancient Peace; Summertime in England; Satisfied; When Heart Is Open;* and two others. WARNER

BROS. BSK 3462 \$7.98, © M5 3462 \$7.98, © M8 3462 \$7.98.

Performance: **Mystic moods**
Recording: **Very good**

What Van Morrison apparently tried for here, and sometimes achieved, was a kind of pastoral mysticism. As usual, he derives content largely from style—there is nothing much of significance in the words if you take them literally—but this time he takes the method further than ever before. Two pieces, *Summertime in England* and *When Heart Is Open*, run longer than fifteen minutes, and the others meander and chant and doodle about for quite some time too.

Summertime is a sort of stream-of-consciousness outpouring that puts a slow-moving cascade of pictures in your head. But what it and most of the others suggest more



VAN MORRISON
Spiritual qualities beyond words

strongly is a kind of preaching; they remind me, in fact, of the chant-like pitch a Baptist preacher makes when the invitation hymn is being sung and the attention is turned to getting people "saved." I used to think in church that it was a sort of body-count situation with the preacher's ego the main thing on the line. Morrison, let me quickly say, does not convey that attitude. He has just incorporated something from the form: phrases are repeated in nonlinear fashion not for their meaning per se but for their cadence and its contribution to the mood, which is the main thing. *Summertime* has upwards of three hundred words, perhaps a record, and it mostly seems ad-libbed. "It ain't why," Morrison says, "it just is." That seems to be the gist of the verbal part of the message. But most of the message, for all the album's wordiness, is nonverbal, and a lot depends on the mood you bring to it. I don't recommend this as a party record, but in private it can take on spiritual qualities in ways its own words can't describe. *N.C.*

ROBERT PALMER: *Clues.* Robert Palmer (vocals, guitar, bass, percussion); instrumental accompaniment. *Looking for Clues; Not a Second Time; Johnny and Mary; I Dream of Wires;* and four others. ISLAND

ILPS 9595 \$7.98, © M5 9595 \$7.98, © M8 9595 \$7.98.

Performance: **Good**
Recording: **Good**

I'm undecided about Robert Palmer's music; he's good, but I'm not clear about what he is trying to do. *Looking for Clues* and his hit single *Johnny and Mary* are about people who can't find themselves, and Palmer's performances of them are as meandering as the characters. *Sulky Girl* is more focused, but it reminds me too much of the Stones' *Stupid Girl* (though Palmer's song isn't as vicious). Palmer's version of Gary Numan's *I Dream of Wires* is better than the author's (Numan plays keyboards on it here), but then Palmer can sing and Numan can't. Palmer and Numan co-wrote the closing cut, *Found You Now*, which lurches about without landing anywhere.

Most surprising, though, is Palmer's cover of the Beatles' *Not a Second Time*. This contains an extra verse by Palmer that I find makes the song fuller, and I prefer his version to the Fab Four's original. As a matter of fact, I enjoy a lot of Palmer's work, but I would like more, er, *clues* about what he's up to. *J.V.*

RECORDING OF SPECIAL MERIT

ALAN PARSONS PROJECT: *The Turn of a Friendly Card.* Alan Parsons Project (vocals and instrumentals). *May Be a Price to Pay; I Don't Wanna Go Home; The Gold Bug; Nothing Left to Lose;* and five others. ARISTA AL 9518 \$8.98, © ATC 9518 \$8.98, © AT8 9518 \$8.98.

Performance: **Electro-pop magic**
Recording: **Simply sensational**

If, like me, you still have a soft spot for the symphonic sound of the Moody Blues, then you'll have a lot of fun with this latest album from the Alan Parsons Project. It's vastly more accessible than "Eve," the previous release by this "group"—essentially Parsons and Eric Woolfson, who write and produce the material—and harks back to their enormously successful "Pyramid." It is crammed full of delicious music, fascinating and somewhat surreal lyrics, and multi-layered productions of the sort we used to call "trippy."

The album's highlight is a group of five connected tracks on side two, totaling sixteen minutes, that opens and closes with the haunting title song, *The Turn of a Friendly Card*. The theme of gambling is carried through the rock-accented, up-tempo *Snake Eyes*—which has vocals by Chris Rainbow and a Billy Joel kind of energy, and which is, overall, the best cut on the album—and two lush instrumentals, *The Ace of Swords* and *Nothing Left to Lose*. The production piles layer upon layer of music in Parsons' familiar style. The reprise of the title song at the end suggests a movie-soundtrack close, but it never quite becomes either hysterical or sappy.

It might be charged that this music is all effect, that it lacks spontaneity, soul, emotion. But Parsons and Woolfson are not balladeers or rockers, and they don't try to be. They are craftsmen, and if you like the genre they work in, you'll like this album. *I.C.*

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