

Dragon
Running Free
Portrait

Some days after I'd been given this album, I met Dragon vocalist Marc Hunter for an interview. Now, he's a big guy. Six foot something and an assured, even arrogant, manner. At the end of the interview Marc fixed me with a stare and said, "You guys got a copy of the album?" I assured him we had. In clipped tones he said, "What do you think of it?"

What do you say? I decided to go for the truth. "Well... I don't think it's as strong as your last one." He stared at me. "You're right," he replied.

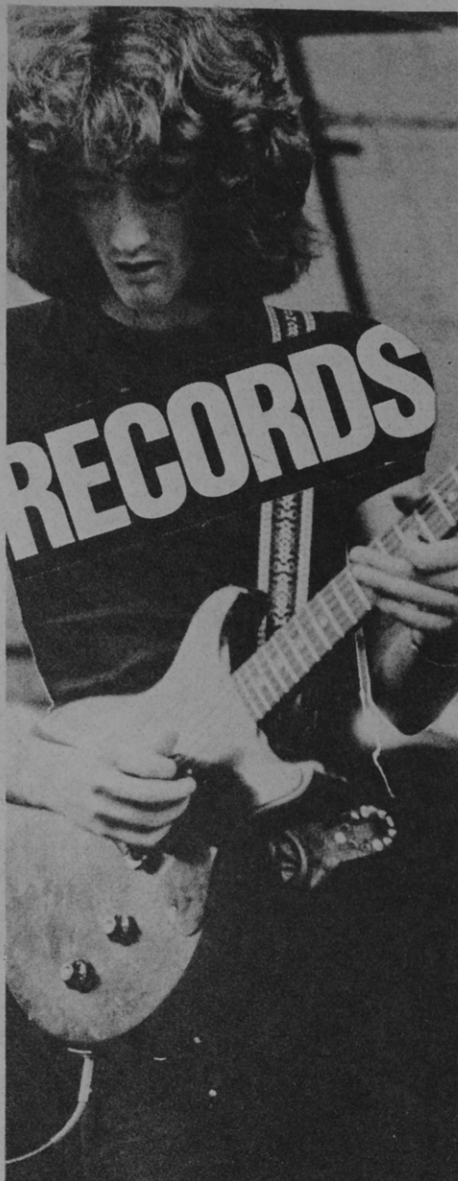
So there it is, straight from the horses mouth. And I guess I was right, but only partially. *Sunshine* was a strong album. It presented snappy melodic songs in a potent pop/soul/rock composite. Its Australian success was entirely deserved.

Running Free adopts much the same musical approach as its predecessor, but apart from the single, "April Sun in Cuba", lacks the kind of immediate melodic hooks that "Get That Jive", "Sunshine" and "This Time" provided on the last album. On a surface level, then, it's a less attractive record. But Marc assured me the album's strengths are buried deliberately. And he's right.

If I don't like an album I find it difficult to even work up the motivation to listen to it. With *Running Free*, I have no such problems. It contains enough immediate rewards to keep you listening and its strengths are slowly revealed. Particular goodies are Paul Hewson's "Shooting Stars", and his beautiful ballad "Since You Changed Your Mind". In fact, the only really weak tracks are the two rockers "Any Fool Can Tell You" and "Bob's Budgie Boogie". Effective stage stompers though they may be, on record they develop little beyond their first lines.

O.K. then, don't expect to be clouted on the head at first listening. But the rewards are definitely here for those prepared to put in the effort. Marc told me so.

Alastair Dougal



Robert Taylor, Dragon.

Joni Mitchell
Don Juan's Reckless Daughter
Asylum

1977 has been a bumper year for me as far as W.E.A. are concerned. My five top records come from their catalogue — Maria Muldaur's *Sweet Harmony*, the McGarrigle sisters' *Dancer with Bruised Knees*, the Beach Boys' *Love You*, Linda Ronstadt's *Simple Dreams* and Randy Newman's *Little Criminals*. And it seems that Joni Mitchell's new double album is going to be added to the list.

Together with Newman's *Little Criminals*, Mitchell's *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* is the premier songwriter's album of the year. Yet Newman and Mitchell are strikingly different in their songwriting approaches. Newman writes short and epigrammatic songs whereas Mitchell favours expansive and rhapsodic tales — the prototype of which is probably "The Last Time I saw Richard" from her *Blue* album.

Newman likes to achieve some distance between himself and his song, whereas Mitchell's songs seem almost embarrassingly personal at times. "Talk to Me" from the new album is a case in point with the songwriter searching for "Mr Mystery" and pissing tequila anacondas in parking lots.

"Dreamland", the liveliest and most accessible track from *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, sees Mitchell relating her life style to her Canadian origins, and "Jericho", which gets its first airing on *Miles of Aisles*, is a poetic development of the conceit that is at the core of Capra's *It Happened One Night*.

In a concert recording of the late sixties, the lady prefaced her "Fiddle and the Drum" with a long rap on the problems of being a Canadian in America. *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* seems to indicate that Joni Mitchell is coming to terms with America. The last song on the album, "The

Silky Veils of Ardour" is a strange one with many phrases lifted from the American folk-song book — "Come all you fair and tender school girls", "I am a poor wayfaring stranger", "The water is wide" etc. etc. This parallels "Old Man on the Farm" from the *Little Criminals* album where Newman concludes:

Goodnight Ladies
Sorry if I stayed too long
So long it's been good to know you
I love the way I sing that song.

In the song "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter" the American problem is crystallised as a snake-eagle duality which works as both the expression of the Indian-European relationship and the songwriter's latent schizophrenia. At the very core of the album is "Paprika Plains", a fifteen minute epic which fills one side of the album.

In "Paprika Plains" Joni Mitchell portrays the European rape of the Indian culture with such artistry and emotional power that one asks oneself "What ever happened to Buffy Sainte-Marie?". The song culminates in the image of a child's beachball which is transformed into a dance hall glitter ball, an image that recalls James Ivory's *Savages* of a few years back.

"Paprika Plains" gains a lot of its power from Mike Gibbs' string arrangements, but the album has an assortment of musicians from track to track. Chaka Khan, Airto, Wayne Shorter with a brilliant soprano sax solo at the end of "Jericho", John Guerin, Michel Colombier (remember *Wings?*), J.D. Souther and Glen Frey.

It is ridiculous in a way writing a review of such a complex album as this after only a week of listening. But I can't see how your record collection can even hope to attain to respectability without a copy of it, right next to Randy Newman's *Little Criminals*.

William Dart

Bob Welch
French Kiss
Capitol

Bob Welch used to play guitar and do a bit of vocals with Fleetwood Mac (pre—"Rhiannon" days). Now that Mac are enjoying all that lucrative fame he feels it's time to get in on the action, and just to show there's no hard feelings a few of the group lend a hand with his first album. Mick Fleetwood does a bit of drumming, Christine McVie sings some backup, and Lindsey Buckingham plays guitar. Buckingham and McVie also produced track one, the hit "Sentimental Lady".

Welch has aimed directly at top 40 radio and, if his songs lack the distinctiveness that Mac's writers are capable of, they nonetheless contain some very catchy hooks. "Hot Love Cold World" and "Lose My Heart" (which appears in 2½ versions) would also make good singles.

The problem with the album is that, overall, it tends to induce bland-out. Vocals, arrangements and production all want for variety. Welch has a pleasant but nondescript voice — its very lack of character makes Christine McVie's four words of solo vocal on "Sentimental Lady" stand out disconcertingly.

Any variation in the arrangements comes by alternating lead guitar, strings and synthesizer over a standard rhythm section. The production, however, tends to subsume any such differences. Everything, vocals included, is swallowed into one echo-laden sound. No instrument has any bite — the strings have a sharper edge than the fuzzed guitar! This is rock? It's records like this that support my theory that there's an inverse correlation between production

and humanity in recorded sound.

Or perhaps I'm missing the point and these songs are meant to be heard between adverts coming from a two-inch speaker on the beach. As they used to say about Marmite, fine in small doses but too much spoils the flavour.

Peter Thomson

The Commodores
Live
Motown Records

1977 was the year the Commodores brought their brand of funky musical extravaganza to New Zealand. After brilliant shows, they departed leaving in their wake their album *Zoom*, which spawned the singles "Brickhouse", "Zoom" and "Easy".

With the success of *Zoom*, the Commodores were able to undertake a 50 city tour of the U.S. of A on which they recorded *Live*, a double album which features all their major hits, except "Machine Gun".

Live was not recorded at a single show and there is no introduction, encores or significant crowd noise. It consists of 11 live tracks plus the studio recording of their new single, "Too Hot to Trot".

The six Commodores are assisted on stage by the 'Mean Machine', — 3 horns and a guitar man. And unlike more traditional Motown acts, the Commodores do not work with an orchestra or dismiss their finest material in fast paced medleys.

With live recordings, the energy expressed on stage — in movement, lighting and dry ice — is not visible. But with the excep-

tion of "Zoom" the energy of intensive stompers like "I feel Sanctified" are more impressive than the ballads. On stage, a slow paced song can easily become only a strategically placed breather for a team of song and dance men.

Possibly, the live versions are not 'a patch on the original' but so what? Live recordings are best considered, not as new and improved versions but as 'loud versions'. Unlike the original AM recordings, to get into *Live*, it has to be played loud. What better way to get up in the morning than to your own Commodores concert?

Though the studio album, *Zoom*, remains the best introduction to the Commodores, if you want something loud and live to cherish until they visit again, *Live* is the answer.

Murray Cammick

Electric Light Orchestra
Out of the Blue
United Artists

ELO's previous album, *A New World Record*, successfully stole from the likes of the Beatles, the Easybeats and Little Richard with possibly unintentional good humour. The humour was most obvious in the mock seriousness of the introduction to "Tightrope" and in virtually the whole of "Rockaria!" For that reason one couldn't help but admire Jeff Lynne for shaping ELO into a hit-making unit where Roy Wood had failed.

But success can do funny things to a person, and *Out of the Blue* raises questions that could be safely overlooked before. ELO sound more like Chicory Tip than ELO these days and Jeff Lynne seems to be taking himself seriously. Someone should remind him that plagiarism doesn't count only if it's done with good humour.

Plagiarising yourself is one of the funniest things you can do but this time there's no revamped "Do Ya" to fall back on. This is a double album, more than an hour's playing time, choc-full of hit singles as Lou Reed might have put it, but all of such similarity as to make a double album a waste of time.

There is no apparent progression from *A New World Record* to this; Jeff Lynne has found a hit-making formula which he intends to play for all its worth. In the end the choice is still yours; buy this if you like. The question is how much we ask of the records we buy.

Jeremy Templar.

Greatest Hits
Roxy Music
Polydor

Bryan Ferry's cover for this Roxy compilation is almost unspeakable in its golden vulgarity. But "greatest hits" albums have always been a little blatant.

Greatest hits? Yes, folks, remember all those chart-busters. Still, it's arguably the best of Roxy, striking a good balance in culling from four albums and including the singles "Virginia Plain" and "Pyjamarama".

The remaining tracks are "Do The Strand," "All I Want is You," "Out of the Blue," "Editions of You," "Love is the Drug," "Mother of Pearl," "A Song for Europe," "The Thrill of it All" and "Street Life."

The tracks are not arranged chronologically but there's no jarring in the juxtaposition of songs from different periods. A good sampling of a unique concept. Whether Ferry, whose vision it was, equals the work here in his solo career remains to be seen.

Ken Williams

Running on Empty
Jackson Browne
Asylum

If I asked you what was last year's record industry cliché, you'd have to say the live album.

If I then asked you what was the worst cliché of the art rock debacle, you'd have to say the concept album.

What then are you going to make of *Running on Empty*, which is nothing less than a live concept album?

In fact, if you have any faith in Jackson Browne, you shouldn't expect anything — because you're going to get a surprise. While the tag 'live concept album' might conjure up visions of *Thick as a Brick* played at Madison Square Garden with a liberal sprinkling of 'improvements' added afterwards, *Running on Empty* can only be described as a whole new type of record.

I don't think I have ever heard a record, with the possible exception of Neil Young's *Tonight's the Night*, which so accurately mirrors its content in the way it is played, and recorded. *Running* is unquestionably a

record about touring in a rock and roll band, and so Browne has recorded himself and his band on tour. That didn't involve setting up all the facilities of the Record Plant in some stadium, but instead we have tracks recorded in hotel rooms, on stage, backstage, and best of all, on the tour bus.

So, if the song is about the rigours of travelling everywhere by bus — "Nothing but Time" — then record it on the bus itself, with the driver throwing in gear changes in time with the chord changes. If its a song about missing out on the girl you had your eye on during a rehearsal, record it at rehearsal, like "Rosie". Virtually every song on the album, right down to the shambling, hotel room version of the Rev. Gary Davis' "Cocaine" not only has a place on the record, but a definite and important location.

Of course, another side of crawling around the country for a songwriter is the difficulty of writing new material. This must be especially noticeable for Browne who has confessed to taking up to five years to get a song right. Rather than skirt around this by retreading old favourites, he has fil-

led the album with collaborations, songs by others, and songs which show a similar instantaneous roughness to the recent output of Neil Young and Bob Dylan.

This more vigorous approach, along with the conspicuous absence of Jon Landau from the producer's chair marks a welcome turning back from the almost-formula slickness of *The Pretender*. I only hope that Bruce Springsteen also escapes Landau's cottonwool clutches.

The band — basically The Section (Kortchmar, Sklar, Kunke and Doerge) with David Linley added — has to be good to come up with the goods under these kind of conditions, and as you would expect from L.A.'s finest, they come through, with an extra edge you seldom get from them on more familiar territory.

I saw Jackson Browne and David Linley perform together here early last year, and swore then that I'd sell my grandmother to sit in the front row of a real full-scale concert by them. Now I've heard one I'm in no mood to change my mind.

Francis Stark

