

Stereo Review

APRIL 1976 • ONE DOLLAR

*Joni Mitchell
& the
Preservation
of
Innocence*



FORMERLY HI FI/STEREO REVIEW

Stereo Review®

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COVER: Illustration by David Chestnutt

HOT PLATTERS

Weisberg cond. NONESUCH 71281. Weill's familiar pieces and Milhaud's jazz-flavored tone poem are gloriously recorded here with spectacular sparkle and crash. We find the prominence of percussion entirely appropriate and quite natural. The handling of the stereo provides a highly satisfying sense of depth and solidity. Marc Aubort and Joanna Nickrenz, engineering and tape editing.

● **EARLY MUSIC IN ITALY, FRANCE, AND BURGUNDY.** Secular polyphonic works from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. Studio der Frühen Musik. TELEFUNKEN 641068. The recording acoustics is open and reverberant, the miking very close, and the tone quality of voices and instruments is truly exciting in its purity and naturalness. The pressing is first-rate.

● **VIRTUOSO OVERTURES:** Works by Rossini, Wagner, Johann Strauss, and others. Los Angeles Philharmonic, Zubin Mehta cond. LONDON CS6858. The orchestral sound here is as attractive as any we've heard. The violins are (in the best London manner) almost too glamorous to be believed, the brass, percussion, and woodwinds are rich and sharply etched, and the stereo is highly convincing. This is a recording anyone could love. Ray Minshall, producer; James Lock and Gordon Parry, engineers.

● **GEORGE BENSON: *White Rabbit*.** CTI 6015. This relaxed jazz outing is complemented by a recorded sound that is somewhat distant and pleasantly spacious. Most prominent is Benson's electric guitar (smoother and flatter than the typical rock instrument), along with a warm, full bass and good percussion. The highs are subtle, delicate, and precise. Start with side two. Creed Taylor, producer; Rudy Van Gelder, engineer.

● **STANLEY CLARKE: *Stanley Clarke*.** NEMPEROR NE 431. A stimulating amalgam of jazz elements and hard rock, recorded with stinging impact and clarity. Percussion is excellent, and the prodigious acoustic bass that begins side two is by itself worth the price of admission. Ken Scott, engineer.

● **RY COODER: *Paradise and Lunch*.** REPRISE MS 2179. Ry Cooder sings rather funny country-style songs, and his voice on this recording sounds just as we imagine it would in real life. Almost everything else sounds excellent as well, particularly Earl Hines' piano on the final cut, which is as smooth and cool as cream. Lenny Waronker and Russ Titelman, producers; Lee Herschberg, engineering.

● **LARRY CORYELL: *The Restful Mind*.** VANGUARD 79353. Coryell's guitar is the principal attraction in these graceful reworkings of several classical pieces and themes, but the sidemen also come off very well. The guitar is recorded almost completely out of phase on a number of bands, and at times it sounds almost like two instru-

ments. Vanguard tells us that this is a result of the way the instrument was miked. In any case, it should not deter anyone from buying the record, since the effect (quite spacey) can almost always be diminished or eliminated by reversing the phase (switch your speaker leads) on one channel of the playback system. Danny Weiss, producer; David Baker, engineer.

● **KING CRIMSON: *Larks' Tongues in Aspic*.** ATLANTIC SD 7263. Brutal electronic rock—some strikingly recorded natural sounds together with relentless, outrageously gimmicked fuzz guitars and numerous indescribable effects. This is definitely not for everyone, and some will find it hugely obnoxious. However, our general impression is of brilliant, clear highs (though there is some hiss) and seemingly enormous dynam-



ic range. (This is the one recording on which the reviewers could not fully agree. One doubted that the recording is "clean" throughout, another found the distortion remarkably "undistorted." We would be interested in readers' reactions.) Nick Ryan, engineer.

● **THE HOLLIES: *Hollies*.** EPIC KE 32574. For the soft-rock crowd there is this immaculate recording. The drums are a little anemic, but the cymbal—the kind with the jangly rivets in it, we suspect—sounds fine, and the back-up instruments are quite good if slightly bodiless. Even the (essentially monotonic) electric bass is well handled. A professional job. Ron Richards and the Hollies, producers; Allan Parsons, engineer.

● **MODERN JAZZ QUARTET: *The Art of the Modern Jazz Quartet/The Atlantic Years*.** ATLANTIC SD 2-301, two discs. During its years with Atlantic the venerable MJQ benefited from some of the best engineering of the day. This is a compilation of about a dozen different recording sessions spread over nine years, and the differences between them are quite interesting. The recording's one serious flaw is the few moments of severely distorted vibraphone at the end of side one, band two (*Cortège*). Engineers include Tom Dowd, Phil Lehle, and Gösta Wiholm, among others.

● **JONI MITCHELL AND THE L.A. EXPRESS: *Miles of Aisles*.** ASYLUM AB 202, two discs. This is a live-concert album, and it is easy to visualize yourself on an enormous stage standing just in front of the per-

formers, who are clustered in the middle. You're hearing the music from the stage monitor speakers, from the comparatively remote concert-sound system (with a touch of howlback now and then), and even some directly from the performers themselves. A four-channel synthesizer enhances the illusion tremendously, but stereo playback works well too. Start with side four to get into the spirit of things. (For comparison, listen to some of this material in studio-recorded versions on "*Ladies of the Canyon*," Asylum 6376.) Henry Lewy, engineering and coordination.

● **TOM PAXTON: *Tom Paxton 6*.** ELEKTRA 74066. Paxton is an admirable troubadour who has a pleasing way with humor light and ribald. Thanks to reverberation (probably artificial), his voice here is a little

too large and full to be natural, but the back-up instruments are recorded with clarity and aliveness. Milton Okun, producer; Phil Ramone, David Green, and Dennis Murphy, engineers.

● **HORACE SILVER: *In Pursuit of the 27th Man*.** BLUE NOTE BN-LA054-F. A small jazz ensemble, tightly recorded in a relatively intimate environment. Numerous instruments shine here, but a constant fascination is the variety and delicacy of the high-hat cymbal, played with sticks and both ends of the wire brush at different times. George Butler was the producer. Rudy Van Gelder the engineer.

● **CAT STEVENS: *Mona Bone Jakon*.** A&M SP 4260. We generally like the engineering Cat Stevens gets, and we particularly like *MBJ*, although there could perhaps be a little more reverb on the piano. The close-up guitars are captured with meticulousness and delicacy, the drums and cymbal are clear and crisp, the bass is varied and clean, and Stevens' voice goes through all kinds of changes through the courtesy of the studio's black boxes. A&M's surfaces are quite good. Paul-Samwell Smith, producer.

● **RALPH TOWNER: *Solstice*.** ECM 1060. This seems to be a grafting of some new-wave European jazz shoots onto American jazz roots. The recorded sound is hard—even a little piercing—but the detail is splendid, the sound is full-bodied, and the stereo image has excellent depth. The U.S. pressing was fully the equal of its West-German counterpart. Jan Erik Kongshaug, engineer.

JONI MITCHELL:



By Noel Coppage

LP

INNOCENCE ON A SPREE

JONI MITCHELL would seem to be all there, in black and white, in her own words. She has made a hardheaded, crusading effort to describe intimate feelings in her songs, and her candor covers style as well as content. The popular-music audience has seldom encountered a songwriter so open about the specifics of personal hopes and fears, or a writer-performer so overt, as Ellen Willis said, about her artistic pretensions. No wonder *Time* observed in 1974: "Everyone seems to know Joni. She is the rural neophyte waiting in a subway, a free spirit drinking Greek wine in the moonlight, an organic Earth Mother dispensing fresh bread and herb tea, and the reticent feminist who by trial and error has charted the male as well as the female ego." Also, for good measure: "... a modern Isadora whose life is a litmus for the innocent and the imaginative." But there's too much color, too much contrast in all these images and "everyone" is too many people; we have so much information from Joni and her Muse that we're back where she was after she'd seen both sides of clouds, love, and life: we really don't know her at all. And there's one more image that begs to be added to the list: a modern Eve dispensing apples from the Tree of Knowledge; the big blow to innocence comes when you realize that the more you learn, the more there is to learn.

Innocence is a quality programmed to self-destruct, in the sense that Eve's innocence was what made her vulnerable to the serpent and that vulnerability resulted in her loss of innocence. Yet it is an ironically enduring quality that, on secondary levels, renews itself—get an inkling into how ignorant you really are and you've got some of your innocence back. Biting into the original Big Apple didn't wipe out innocence but put it on a scale; what it ended was *pristine* innocence, leaving us no longer innocent of the concept, no longer unconscious of the connection between knowledge—experience—and guilt. Joni Mitchell has been, like Eve, a larger-than-life figure where this irony of innocence is concerned.

Knowing too much and understanding too little is what we get for being curious. The head will take being butted against this quandary only so long at a time, though, and I want us to back-pedal right here and take a little run across the North American contin-

ent to look for more graphic signs that may have marked Joni Mitchell's progress. When an area becomes polluted, move on, we say in these parts, and that ought to apply to data pollution as well as other kinds. Besides, Mitchell thanked *National Geographic* for indirectly helping her create "The Hissing of Summer Lawns," and travel, of course, is the fundamental metaphor of folk music created on this continent. I got to looking at maps and globes and reflecting on places and was struck by the differences between the two major hometowns in Joni Mitchell's life—Saskatoon, the one she left, and Los Angeles, the one she adopted.

BEFORE she was a fair-haired waif in such a place as a subway, she was a high-school girl in Saskatoon, a small city founded as the proposed capital of a temperance ("temperance" always meaning prohibition in these cases) colony and named after the Cree word for an edible berry. It sits in the middle of the prairie province of Saskatchewan, producer of more than half of Canada's wheat. There's some wildness to the north, where crops give way to jack pine and frigid blasts of air. They call the swamps muskegs up there, a fine musical word Gordon Lightfoot worked into his frontier chronicle, *Canadian Railroad Trilogy*, and one suspects they have better names for rain and wind and fire. The people of Saskatoon are conscious of the north, as people in Lewiston, Maine, are conscious of Aroostook County, but the ambiance favors the immediate sur-

"... we have so much information from Joni and her Muse that ... we really don't know her at all"

roundings—agriculture, prairie, sky . . . lonely distances and wheat. A flood of imagery from Ian and Sylvia Tyson suggests this, in lyrics about blue evening shadows forty feet long, night rushing fast because the land is flat, lonely girls lingering in the doorways to watch headlights and listen to

the song of diesel engines out on the highway: "Diesels sing of bright spots with colors running wild—'Follow me where the evenings overflow.'"

Saskatoon was a stop for the semis, but not the mecca they sang about. Joni Mitchell the teenager—known then as Joan Anderson—had access to juke boxes, trucked-in rock-and-roll and folk music, but she was surrounded by the ordered, sectioned, organized life of farming country deep in the continent's interior. She has talked and written little about Joan Anderson's days there—*Urge for Going*, which Tom Rush recorded, *could* be taken as pertinent—but it seems clear enough that she wanted to follow those diesels. She was rebellious, she says, and spent a lot of time staying up late and drawing pictures. Just about the time she was becoming interested in expressing herself musically, she was doing the at-once romantic and mundane thing of being a waitress in a coffeehouse—one named after Louis Riel, one of Canada's favorite heroes and, better still, one of its favorite outlaws. He led the local half-breeds, the French and Scottish *métis*, or part-Indians, in two rebellions against the government. The second one in Saskatchewan resulted in his capture, trial, and execution for treason, and in his becoming a martyr to the fledgling cause of French-Canadian nationalism. Joan Anderson's own hero in those coffeehouse days was that rebel said to be without a cause, James Dean.

"It was then and still is a constant war to liberate myself from values not applicable to the period in which I live," Mitchell told *Time*. A flight from someone else's values is, as a practical matter, a flight from someone else's rules. Farm country and the interior are fraught with rules, and there are literally few places on the prairie for a born rule-breaker, or rule-ignorant, to hide. The rules *started* for mostly valid reasons, since the business of producing food is an absolutely vital one and since the frontier, which this was not long ago, could kill you if you slipped up; but sometimes it is the lot of the innocent and the imaginative to be ahead of the crowd in spotting rules that have outlived their usefulness and now are mischief-prone taboos. Mitchell, if she did feel penned in, is to be complimented for her restraint with her own kind of pen. A more typical reaction against

farm country (in the U.S., anyway) is that of the not-so-innocent but fairly imaginative H. L. Mencken: "What lies under [prohibition], and under all the other crazy enactments of its category, is no more and no less than the yokel's congenital and incurable hatred of the city man—his simian rage against everyone who, as he sees it, is having a better time than he is."

What Joni Mitchell did was to choose to live in a canyon (topographically: *relief*, not readily available on prairies) in a sprawling hodgepodge of a city famous for throwing the old rules out the window. Most of the resentment the rest of the country feels for Los Angeles is translated as the informed suspicion that they practice unrestrained hedonism out there and probably are raising up a new breed of pagans. Behind that, I think, is a kind of shock at how they treated the old rules, and a fear of anarchy. Police chiefs, perhaps sensing this on some level, always seem to talk extra tough and look extra mean in Los Angeles. In fact, of course, Los Angeles has many different sets of rules—it's the compatibility, the overlap, of these sets that's so confusing to people in places that never had to deal with, among other things, a fantasy factory like Hollywood in their midst. I fancy I see what Joni Mitchell sees in such a place, and where do you think Eve would have headed if *she'd* had the chance?

PRAIRIE girl Joan Anderson left Saskatoon after high school to attend art school briefly (her drawings regularly play strong thematic roles on her album covers) in Calgary, where the Rockies give relief to Alberta, but she was only nineteen when she followed the die-seis' song to a spa of the night, Toronto, to practice art with music. By the time she had a career rolling, an album on the market, she had spent time broke and scuffling, had met and married singer Chuck Mitchell, had lived (and performed) with him for a year or so in which they were based in Detroit—and had gone through a divorce and moved to New York. These are experiences that rake off a lot of innocence, but a learner, an *examiner*, emerges from them on a different plane where new stuff is going on and is, relatively and functionally, innocent again.

The thing one noticed about Joni Mitchell was how visible this process was; trying to obscure it by being cool was not in her. She came along with these guitar tunings she had figured out by herself and said, "I compose by discovery," meaning findings in her feelings as well as accidental chords. There is a vital naiveté in this that I see as consistent with her geographic migra-

tion away from "set ways" (confirmed by her finding no less a place than *Paris* "too old and cold and settled in its ways") and consistent with the way so much of her work simultaneously holds hands with romanticism and realism. A scholar could *know* all that Joni Mitchell knows. Open tunings for the guitar have been around for years and anyone could look them up in some manual. Countless books go into detail about the subtleties in the psyche. The impor-



"The one old rule Mitchell did overtly and constantly invoke was the one against being coy."

tant difference between looking it all up (that is, memorizing a new set of rules) and going to see for yourself is the important difference between ordinary people and artists—maybe it's adrenalin. There's just no way to be as excited about someone else's discovery as you are about your own. The question of whether you want, or can handle, the excitement is a valid one—but not if you are an artist; the excitement is a necessary source of energy in that case, and that's that. It is in Joni Mitchell's interests *not* to know all the diagrams and charts that show where the limits are, what "can't" be done, for rules, one way or another, always trace back to safety, a luxury she cannot afford.

Mitchell somehow kept herself from hearing "you can't *do* that," a sound as familiar to most of us as the refrigerator motor kicking on—and this was at once a romantic and realistic deaf ear she managed to turn. Being romantic, taking chances—Playing Cowboy, I call it—is a practical matter for an artist. The one old rule Mitchell did overtly and constantly invoke was the one against being coy. She has not hidden her ambition to make art any more than she has hidden her hopes and disappointments. Or her terrors: no matter how scary it is, she'll say it. We who live by our wits worry most, probably, about our minds drying up, and there's Joni: "I'm just living on nerves and feelings . . . with a weak and a lazy mind." That really isn't *her*, is it? That's the way she was feeling at a particular time; she was ignoring the political rule, in and out of music, to present a single image free of inconsistencies. When she does have a consistent feeling, she presents that, too—she has regularly looked for strength in a mate, for example: "I went looking for a cause, or a strong cat without claws" and "Send me someone who is strong and somewhat sincere" and "It takes a heart like Mary's these days when your man gets weak. . . ." And she has noted with due irony the situation men are in nowadays where strength in a mate is concerned: "You don't like weak women, you get bored so quick . . . You don't like strong women, 'cause they're hip to your tricks." She does not, in short, nail much of anything *down*; she just does not like to generalize.

Very romantic and very practical of her. Taking shortcuts others have discovered and marked, and arriving at aphorisms, would be the surest way for her to get lost. Someone else is always ready to sum it up, to write "Everyone's lookin' for some kind of love" and "I'm going to keep falling in love until I get it right," which cover the thrust of what she's saying, but her way is more specific. It's just as practical, though. "Joni exorcises her demons by writing these songs," Stephen Stills said. Start with someone who's really innocent, a child, and watch it grow, and you'll see every day the power of language, words, labels, in the dehorning of demons. No thought is quite as scary put into words as it was before in its formless, elusive, dark state.

A writer without her commitment to, as Hemingway put it, "writing what you truly felt rather than what you were supposed to feel," would turn out something with the taint of True Confessions if he tried what she does. Generalizing and short-cutting would plant a snigger of sensationalism be-

tween the lines if not right in them. Few songwriters, even in this so-called post-sexual-revolution period, can actually communicate something without a wink in it on the subject of sex. Mitchell looks you straight in the eye and deals with one of its crazy-making aspects: "You hurry . . . To the blackness . . . And the blankets . . . To lay down an impression . . . And your loneliness."

The naïveté of her discovering nature also gives vitality to the technical side of her writing and performing. She doesn't seem to know how "basic" and semi-mandatory the three-chord melody is; she can't even *make* what you could readily identify as tonic-dominant-subdominant chord relationships with some of those guitar tunings. The counterpoint she sometimes uses on the piano is so farfetched you wonder how she keeps in her head the tune she's singing. And, speaking of singing, there's a taboo against cheating into falsetto too often, and she (although she has smoothed it out somewhat recently) has made doing that a basic part of her style. Most trained musicians and English majors dislike the songwriting practice of putting words in a melody that bends them into more than their natural number of syllables. It's the kind of thing that calls undue attention to itself and interferes with the listener's concentration on the sense of the statement—as certain abominations by Handel graphically demonstrate—but that's just another generality you wouldn't want to wrap around Joni Mitchell. *The Arrangement*, for example, starts out, "You could have been more than a name on the door on the thirty-third flo-o-o-o-or in the a-i-ir," with *floor* waving erratically into five syllables and *air* into three. But can't you just *feel* that old skyscraper, and the "success" it houses, swaying in the wind?

Sometimes, of course, one does sense a degree of California School of Pointless Insight in her work. Sometimes I feel I've put myself through all manner of tortuous self-analysis with her and am no closer to knowing what to do about it, and the vehicle of escape—whether it be a big yellow taxi, the pick-up pitch of a fast lady trying to compete with the hockey game in the bar of the Empire Hotel, or a street corner where someone is providing free clarinet music—is not always there when I need it. And sometimes one discovers too much artful dodging in the melody these insights are, ah, couched in, and Joni Mitchell's voice is the *only* one that can get anything out of it. Friends (two or three of mine consider her "shrill," but the rest are ardent and long-time admirers) are complaining

about "The Hissing of Summer Lawns." Pretentious, some say, meaning (I gather) not artistically but intellectually. Others claim that the less serious parts of it are too full of jive—including too much use of *jive* and words like it—and they don't want her making what she does jibe with this label someone pinned on her, Queen of Rock. Others object to her trafficking with jazz affectations or taking Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross too serious-



"Joni Mitchell has a great stake in innocence—and that's why she has to keep putting it on the line."

ly. They worry, that is, about whether this is a sign of her staying on one plane too long, hedging about being a neophyte again.

I wonder instead if "Hissing" may have been a *longer* jump than she could gracefully make. Her liner-note message—"The whole unfolded like a mystery, and it is not my intentions to unravel that mystery for anyone"—reads a little bit nervous, a little bit defensive, to me. This could be merely the eye of the beholder playing its tricks, of course; it does seem that in "Hissing" Mitchell was trying for the kind of ambiguity that the *ear* of the beholder could put to private uses. Spiritually, she may have primed her followers for all this, but stylistically she has not;

without giving much warning in previous work, she slips—in ambitious songs like *Don't Interrupt the Sorrow* and *Shadows and Light*—into a sort of Joycean stream-of-consciousness way with words, and a job of making grammatical sense of them must be done before one can start to cogitate upon what they mean. Did she conclude there was no way to be more direct about these things, or did she, consciously or unconsciously, court mystery—was she, consciously or unconsciously, trying to impress those academic types who like to have things as abstract as possible so the rabble can't unscramble them? Too soon to tell, I think, but keep in mind that the simplest answer sometimes *is* the best, and the simplest answer is that she was again flying in the face of, trying to fly away from, a set of rules.

There will be other albums, anyway, that can't help but put this one in better perspective. Mitchell seems to be looking out at sociology more, without leaving the rough stuff of one-to-one relating unattended, and a good observer is a good observer. She seems now to be interested in the feel of Suburbia and what that does to a person, and she seems to be checking her tentative findings against what she had caught of the feel of Bohemia. But she seems to realize that an artist can't *be* either Suburbanite or Bohemian ("The streets were never really mine . . . Not mine, these glamour gowns"), so I won't worry too much about her fleeing from the monster that sits beside observers and examiners—loneliness—and into some kind of trumped-up Identity.

As to how it is to be that kind of observer and examiner, to be Joni Mitchell nowadays, my guess takes off from *Shadows and Light* and ricochets with contrast. I still see her as a somewhat shy and private person whose boyfriends nonetheless get listed in *Rolling Stone* (which once named her "old lady of the year"), who everyone knows wrote *Willy* about Graham Nash, who had the nerve to write "pack up your suspenders, I'll come meet your plane" when another celebrated ex, James Taylor, was being photographed wearing suspenders and planning to marry Carly Simon. And so forth. I still see her as a naïve person who knows more than the sophisticates do, a person who may have picked up, on the prairie or in Los Angeles or in between, something from the Indians. Western and Eastern, about truly being able to have something only when you can give it up. For verily, as Eve's chronicler would say, Joni Mitchell has a great stake in innocence—and that's why she has to keep putting it on the line. □

"Dylan's voice and guitar can use all the assistance they can get."



Columbia Records

Dylan's "Desire": Not Exactly a Second Coming

DISLIKING Bob Dylan used to be rather fun, back in the days when the slightest criticism of the man or his music could provoke fierce, interminable arguments if not outright fist fights. But lately any such iconoclasm is so commonplace it's almost respectable, and even vicious, premeditated insults elicit only shrugs, yawns, patient sighs, and an occasional raised eyebrow.

To what may we attribute this unexpected moderation of feeling? Has Dylan suffered such an artistic decline that his erstwhile admirers have abandoned him? Have his supporters simply become more tolerant in their

old age? Perhaps, but I suspect that the most significant factor here is apathy, which has all but supplanted enthusiasm throughout our society, particularly among the generation most deeply involved with, and affected by, the myth and music of Bob Dylan. I wish I understood this phenomenon more fully. I can't quite convince myself that it's merely the result of that creeping inertia and conservatism which seem to come as one grows older, nor can I believe that everything is a plot (by the Russians, the Arabs, the Government, the Venetians, or what have you) designed to render us all passive and mindless, ripe for easy conquest.

Whatever its cause, our psychological depression has certainly been reflected in rock-and-roll, not to mention other forms of entertainment. Or did it work the other way around, and we're depressed because our music and movies are so abominable? And that, of course, could simply (or complexly) be a matter of economics: in critic Nik Cohn's axiom, "Entertainment gets sloppy when times get tough." If that is indeed the case, then let us all hope and pray fervently for continued

and greater improvement in our economy. I could probably stand being unemployed and penniless a bit longer, but I am fed up to here with bland, boring, silly, irritating, and merely mediocre music. Thank God (or someone like Him/Her/It/Them or Us—isn't semantics wonderful?) things do seem to be picking up again, and not a second too soon for my taste.

What has all this to do with Bob Dylan's latest album? Possibly very little, but, on the other hand, throughout "Desire" Dylan does seem at least cognizant of our (and his own?) acute lethargy. In *Hurricane* he seeks to arouse our indignation over yet another Great American Injustice, though for my part I find the tone in it too earnest and preachy, the narrative too flat for the song to have much emotional impact. Somehow, Rubin Carter never seems like a real, much less sympathetic or heroic, character to me, and I think that's mostly because the language used is so ordinary, almost hackneyed. Perhaps this was done deliberately for effect, but it weakens what might otherwise have been as poignant and powerful as, say, Dylan's earlier *Percy's Song*, which always leaves me railing at the Fates and the impersonal, inexorable forces of Justice. But *Hurricane* only makes me wonder why, if the case was so flagrantly mis-conducted, the press and the civil liberties people haven't made such a stink that, in this post-Watergate era of hypersensitivity to corruption anywhere in government, they'd be forced to straighten the mess out posthaste.

Dylan approaches the subject of apathy more directly with *Black Diamond Bay*, a neatly executed disaster story complete with earthquakes and erupting volcanoes. In the final verse, he switches from third- to first-person narration, recapitulating the story as an item on the seven o'clock news:

It seems there was an earthquake that
Left nothing but a Panama hat and a pair
of old Greek shoes.

It didn't seem like much was happening,
So I turned it off and went to grab another
beer.

Seems like every time you turn around
There's another hard luck story that
you're gonna hear.

That's it exactly—it doesn't affect me, and there's nothing I could do about it, so why should I care? Even the disaster victims were too busy with their petty preoccupations to see what was coming, or to try to help each other when the catastrophe did come. The jarringly cheerful melody adds the final touch of irony.

Storytelling, rather than songwriting as such, seems to be Dylan's strongest point these days—perhaps it always was. Practically the only song of his from the last few years that I can recall offhand (besides the schmaltzy, overplayed *Forever Young*) is *Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts*, which I've always thought would make a perfect Western. Dylan's melodies have never been anything special; either they work in context or they don't, and that's that.

The one thing Dylan *has* been consistently good at is the manipulation of language, his unusual, occasionally interesting, use of

words. At least for me, that element is missing in much of this album: several of the lyrics are borderline clichés, in fact. The one song I can't fault on this count is *Joey*, a biography in song of a gangster. The line "Always on the outside/Of whatever side there was" strikes me as one of the better descriptions of how it feels to be a misfit. Strangely enough, Joey Gallo, a man who surely broke many of the laws of our land, here becomes a far more likable character than the putatively blameless Rubin Carter. Quite simply, Joey's story is recounted more effectively, and with rather more understanding and compassion, than Rubin's.

The other songs don't work quite so well. *Isis* seems mostly an exotic fantasy, filled with grave-robbing and icebound pyramids. *Mozambique* is a musical picture postcard, and there's an odd, ominous feel to *One More Cup of Coffee* that's never really developed. According to Allen Ginsberg's incoherent liner notes, *Oh Sister* may, or may not, be addressed to all of us "good citizen sisters" too busy exploring our new-found independence to meet the emotional needs of others. It is not only sloppy but sappy: "Oh sister am I not a brother to you/And one deserving of affection?/And is our purpose not the same on this Earth/To love and follow his direction?" Whose? Where? Too mystical for a literalist like me. *Romance in Durango* has a nicely evocative arrangement and rather reminds me of Marty Robbins' old, best-forgotten *El Paso* in its gaudy Southwestern trappings and tragic romanticism.

That leaves us with *Sara*, which I think may have been a mistake for Dylan. A fair amount of his success has been a result of his ability to keep people guessing and wondering about him, after all. Only a fool tells all he knows or feels, and Dylan has never been that, but he may well have revealed more of himself here than was either necessary or wise. I can think of nothing more boring than omniscience.

ALL things considered, "Desire" isn't nearly as bad as I'd expected, but then you'll have gathered that I had no great expectations. The production is a vast improvement over "Blood on the Tracks," as is the instrumental work. Far be it from me to disparage competent musicianship; frankly, I think Dylan's voice and guitar can use all the assistance they can get. Howard Wyeth's drumming is particularly commendable. The violin doesn't always fit into the arrangements, but it salvages at least one song from total forgettability. Emmylou Harris' backing vocals don't sound as good on record as they do in theory; her voice just doesn't seem to blend all that well with Dylan's. More's the pity. And so, the Second Coming this isn't, thank the Lord, but at least it's not trying to be. Who ever wanted that to begin with except those lunatics panting for the Last Judgment?

—Linda Frederick

BOB DYLAN: *Desire*. Bob Dylan (vocals, guitar, harmonica); Emmylou Harris (vocals); Rob Stoner (bass); Howie Wyeth (drums); Scarlet Rivera (violin); other musicians. *Hurricane*; *Isis*; *Mozambique*; *One More Cup of Coffee*; *Oh, Sister*; *Joey*; *Romance in Durango*; *Black Diamond Bay*; *Sara*. COLUMBIA PC 33893 \$6.98, Ⓟ PCA 33893 \$7.98, Ⓢ PCT 33893 \$7.98.

"Huge coils of self-important surrealism unwind aggressively..."



Patti Smith's "Horses"

IF critics are having nightmares these days, one of the worst of them will undoubtedly be about not liking "Horses," Patti Smith's ubiquitous debut album. Without missing a beat, the nation's linotypers seem to have shifted from Springsteen to Smith, and there is no escaping this strange New Jersey Nightingale. Sneakers are out, Rimbaud is in, and I feel so poeticized I could die. However, after listening to the record a dozen times, not only do I not like "Horses," I never want to hear it again—these days a difficult admission to make.

"Horses" is so clearly a classically idiosyncratic "first" album that perhaps the artist's subsequent records will illuminate its not inconsiderable virtues and make it seem much better in years to come than it seems now—even the mistakes of heroes can be heroic. I doubt it, but I hope so. Inwardly vulnerable and outspokenly naïve, Patti Smith is after all a heroine only half-baked, though she seems to have accepted her (possible) stardom as if it were a divine right. As glimpsed through the lines of several recently published interviews, she reminds me very much of Janis Joplin, who, the one time we met, compulsively answered every question, asked or unasked, no matter how foolish the ill-considered statements sometimes made her look. Thus Patti can prattle, "That's just an artistic statement. It has nothing to do with me personally. You can't worry about gender when you're doing art on its highest level." We are expected to either edit out or swallow whole the sophomoric nonsense in this and similar "I was al-

ways into art" proclamations. That may be easy enough to do in the permissive, one-to-one situation of an interview, but such unformed and uninformed grandiloquence on a disc, innocently unconscious though it may be, sets up a resistance that is much harder to ignore.

While "Horses" was being made, writer/singer Smith and producer John Cale reportedly had long, "totally creative" arguments about how to record almost everything. That the singer won most of the battles but lost the war seems a safe conclusion since the disc's production content is generally as minimal as that of a demonstration tape. Granted that no member of Smith's band is a virtuoso, Cale has often in the past done fine work with less-than-professional musicians (the Stooges and the Modern Lovers, for example). Here he appears to have been needlessly handcuffed—he has never, after all, been guilty of overproduction—while the artists had their way, neither wisely nor well, with both the sound (thin and brittle) and the music (slight and uninteresting). It seems reasonable to expect that studio veteran Cale might have whipped even these musicians into shape, especially since he was a charter member of the Velvet Underground, the group they so slavishly imitate, but he evidently didn't get the chance—"Horses" plods far more than it prances.

Poet Patti Smith loved rock-and-roll long before she decided to become a rock-and-roll singer. And once the decision was made, I suspect, she accepted it as already accomplished fact, rushing through her first album

as if some kind of transition or training period were unnecessary. She can talk all she wants to about Mick, Keith, and Brian, but "Horses" sounds less like a Rolling Stones record than a poetry reading at the local "Y." She may look, she may even think, rock-and-roll, but more often than not her carefully precise recitations lack the craziness of the real pandemonium she is striving for. Right now, it's all too serious, not enough fun.

Try as I might, I simply cannot warm to the music and poetry of "Horses." I respect the effort behind it, but how much can you respect a record you wouldn't dream of playing for pleasure? "Patti Smith is nothing if not new" is the line of defense her admirers offer to mockers, but the album sounds to me like a morbid, pretentious rehash of Jim Morrison and Lou Reed. Smith's two major late-Sixties influences. Even *Land*, the best song in it, said to be based on a vision of Jimi Hendrix's last hours, metamorphoses from the Velvet Underground into the Doors for one of its neatest tricks. *Free Money*, another of the better cuts, cleverly weds love to money, making all the double entendres triple, but musically it is again derivative of the late, lamented Underground.

But the Velvets could play, and they didn't sound as if they were recorded in a separate room down the hall from the singer. On most of "Horses," Smith's voice is placed so far front that she sounds strident and affected even when she isn't. Thus isolated, *anyone's* singing is likely to appear spoiled, precious, arrogant without reason; Patti's does.

POETRY, I suppose, is the part which defies translation. Patti Smith is a good poet, but even the best of her work seems—I've struggled hard to characterize it—pointlessly pregnant. "Horses" is too pregnant to be taken seriously, yet it is surely not funny nor meant to be. It is pregnant past the point of aesthetic return, so heavy at times that it cannot make the simplest movement with grace. And when those huge coils of self-important surrealism unwind aggressively toward me, I find it urgent to look for a way out of this place. I've been here before, and it hasn't aged well. Razorblade Alley and Eyeball Lane still look the same, and over there on Arcane Avenue at the Dying Swan Motel and Piano Shop, where only the upper cases hang out, they still measure a man by the width of his donkey and the height of the A in his Art. And you never could get a good meal there anyway. In the early Sixties, I had a friend on Philosopher's Row; he used to play all his "serious" records in a dark room lighted only by black and purple light bulbs and iridescent art. Incense burned. Nonsense reigned. He would have loved "Horses." —Paul Nelson

PATTI SMITH: *Horses*. Patti Smith (vocals); Lenny Kaye (guitar); Richard Sohl (piano); Ivan Kral (bass); Jay Dee Daugherty (drums); other musicians. *Gloria*; *Redondo Beach*; *Birdland*; *Free Money*; *Kimberly*; *Break It Up*; *Land*; *Elegie*. ARISTA AL 4066 \$6.98. © 8301-4066 H \$7.98, © 5301-4066 H \$7.98.