ALBUMS

CAPTAIN BEEFHEART AND THE MAGIC BAND: "Doc At The Radar Station" (Virgin V2172).

THE prospect of a new Beefheart album normally has me prepared to risk gelignite on Virgin's front door to grab the first copy off the presses, but a mild word of warning to less committed readers – don't break a leg to rush for "Doc".

The Captain himself is in fine voice, measuring his temper in bass growls, harsh, grating sneers and passionate outpourings, but the current, comparatively newly-peopled Magic Band are like the classic early line-up playing in a misty mirror – a poorly-defined, indistinct identity, an aping of former actions.

I keep hearing the shape of Art Tripp's drums, but realise it is *only* the shape – Robert Arthur Williams plays safe with the beat without taking those wonderful looping, dropping risks that Art used to muscle the old band. Such comparisons are doubtless invalid – this music is as it is, not related to a previous time and tempo, but when Beefheart picks players with slide guitars, marimba, keyboards, etc, to match the former components so closely in sound and ensemble attitude, it's impossible to avoid comparative measurements.

The album is not without strong moments – "Ashtray Heart" takes one of Beefheart's most vivid lyrics and moves it with a classic Magic Band rumbling riff that is broken then cut with an eery B-movies synth layer from Eric Drew Feldman, and "Sue Egypt" is genuine Van Vliet weird words banged out against the Magic Band equivalent of heavy metal, a slide guitar being shaken and stirred between big, striding chords.

Predictably, a song titled "Making Love To A Vampire With A Monkey On My Knee" has to be the album's terminal jerk, an epic drawn from the roots of the unhinged, unhindered lyrical flow of "Clear Spot", but again the music seems tamely academic in its halting, orchestrated rush.

The true power and beauty of Beefheart's music has been in the ability of his musicians to play the careful, madcap eccentricities of his notes and melodies as if they came from chaos but maintaining a deft underlying precision and rhythmic purpose. The new band has the construction, but none of the chancing verve that characterises a Magic Band at its best.

If praising the past sounds like a pouty way of viewing a new record, the memories are sparked by the music – "Doc" says and tries nothing that wasn't successfully treated on "Shiny Beast", and indeed, the mellow instrumental "A Carrot Is As Close As A Rabbit Gets To A Diamond" was on the early mixes (U.S. version) of "Shiny Beast".

Beefheart offers 12 tracks on "Doc", and most of them tug and tumble at the ear with a uniform, lacklustre mid-range sound, the guitars, keyboards and occasional trombone all parking much in the same register and keeping safely out of the way of the inspired spark and chance that made the early Beefheart.

I may grow to like much of "Doc At The Radar Station", but I think I'll be keeping my powder dry. First Pere Ubu, now the Captain. Can it really be true? – JOHN ORME.

Still dark in the tunnel

JONI MITCHELL: "Shadows And Light" (Asylum AS 62030).

Cards on the table time – I must admit to never having been *that* impressed by Joni Mitchell. While friends, whose opinions I respect, tend to place her in terms of importance alongside Bob Dylan and Neil Young, the secret of her appeal has always eluded me.

I always found her open-heart surgery approach to relationships, and life in general, which she scrupulously celebrated in song, too overpowering to enjoy and too clinical to appreciate. Not that I've been completely oblivious to her problems. I mean, anyone involved with Crosby, Stills *and* Nash obviously merits attention (and some degree of sympathy).

Even from a safe distance, I did manage to appreciate her unlikely switch from guitar totin' folkie to jazz siren. However superficial the transition, it was at least an interesting attempt at broadening horizons. Her adventurous streak enables her to cut a distinctive swathe through the long and uncommercial long grass, way off centre field.

Her last live outing, the double 1974 "Miles Of Aisles", saw her safely ensconsed with the Tom Scott/LA mafiosi, whereas this current double finds Ms Mitchell up to her pectorals in jazz. Of the 15 actual songs here, only "Free Man In Paris" and "Woodstock" come from the pre-"Hissing Of Summer Lawns" period.

Quite where that leaves her faithful audience I'm not sure. However laudable an experiment "Mingus" was, it strikes me as her "Self-Portrait", and I wonder how much of her "Woodstock" audience genuinely enjoy her current preoccupation. However admirable her experimentation, it doesn't follow that her fans will find the same satisfaction in the project as their mentor. But then you venture into the "artist" and "audience" dichotomy, and as Dylan once said: "Just because you like my stuff doesn't mean I owe you anything."

"Shadows And Light" is a swift excursion over recently trampled grass. There's three songs from "Summer Lawns", four from "Hejira", one from "Don Juan" and three from "Mingus". In that company, "Woodstock", with only Mitchell and her electric guitar, sounds distinctly incongruous, a token requiem. Whereas "Introductions" has all the hip credentials, incorporating snatches of her song "Shadows And Light" along with a scene from James Dean's "Rebel Without A Cause", with the lines: "You can't be idealistic all your life, Jim". "Except to yourself, except to yourself"? Significant? Of course, I can't imagine Joni Mitchell compromising anything to record which she doesn't feel is relevant.

For me, though, one of the problems with Joni Mitchell is the way her songs fail to come across as total works; individual lines may strike a responsive chord, but I find her unable to sustain that involvement over an entire song, let alone a double album. It can work, as on the effectively percussive "Dreamland", or the doomily compulsive "Furry Sings The Blues" and the Mingus numbers. There's a token slab of rock 'n' roll, courtesy of the old Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers "Why Do Fools Fall In Love" (the current single), with impressive vocal support from The Persuasions. (Lymon is also featured in the bizarre "Introduction" singing "I'm Not A Juvenile Delinquent". Ironic, when you consider he died of a heroin overdose aged 26!)

Even that voice, which has been known to make grown men crumble like copies of "The War Cry" on a Saturday night, seems restrained here, with few soaring eyrie highs. Her phrasing is as impeccable as ever, but sounds remote and uninvolved.

For those, though, who revel in the Mitchell melancholy, there is enough here to keep you happy, or miserable. It just sounds so part, so flawlessly joined together to no particular end. Seamless saxophone solos from Michael Brecker, immaculate bass and drums from Jaco Pastorious and Don Alias and Mitchell's sultry vocals and inscrutable lyrics.

A good clean sound, a cross section of recent favourites, suitably enthusiastic applause; the song finishes, the record ends, and there's no change, no involvement, all part of an aloof mystique, love songs which lack tangible substance, empty in their abstraction.

The grudging admiration I feel for Joni Mitchell's current musical state is tempered with a sense of frustration at her remoteness. To paraphrase Patti Smith: "Joni Mitchell may be suffering for your sins, but they're not mine". – PATRICK HUMPHERIES.

Joni says remain.