

Tom Scott: Joni's Spark

By DAVID RENSIN

LOS ANGELES — Mention the name Tom Scott in jazz circles and recognition is immediate: The 25-year-old horn-playing prodigy from Southern California is well known for his work with a cross section of contemporary jazz greats, as well as his own albums.

He's also scored for television: *Cannon*, *Cade's County*, *Dan August*, *Barnaby Jones* and *The Streets of San Francisco*. He's done movies: *The Culpepper Cattle Company*, *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes*, the recently completed *Uptown*, *Saturday Night* (with Sidney Poitier, Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, Flip Wilson and Harry Belafonte) and Fritz the Cat's latest sybaritic screen adventure, *The Nine Lives of Fritz the Cat*.

Mention Tom Scott in pop/rock enclaves and you used to get confused looks. Today, ears perk up. Not only does Scott share with Jackson Browne, David Blue and Steve Ferguson the rare distinction of opening the show for Joni Mitchell, but he has taken it one step further. Scott and his band, the L.A. Express, backed her on her recent tour (her first experience performing live with a band) and supported Joni on her latest release, *Court And Spark*.

The subtle and soothing arrangements are mostly Scott's, as are the emotive sax, woodwind and reed parts that complement the voice and lyrics "without," as Scott so aptly puts it, "stepping all over them." Whereas Browne and Blue show up in Joni's lyrics, Scott's presence as an arranger/consultant/sideman has helped produce the most profoundly evolutionary changes in her music since Joni began recording.

Scott met Joni through her sound engineer, Henry Lewy, who had heard Scott's version of "Woodstock" and asked if he wouldn't mind bringing a copy to the studio where they were working on *For The Roses*. Scott complied and "Joni was knocked out." She asked if he would play on her album.

"I said, 'Of course, I'd love to,'" Scott said, laughing over a noisy lunch at the local Hamburger Hamlet. A good-looking young man with brownish-blond hair, Scott has that "well taken care of" air about him. His speech is slow and clear and though he's not done many interviews, he was trying hard to be helpful. Swallowing a piece of lettuce drenched in bleu cheese dressing, he continued.

"But except for 'Woodstock' I didn't know her music that well. When she finally played something for me, I absolutely couldn't believe what I was hearing." Scott leaned closer, his dark eyes communicating excitement from behind wire-rimmed glasses. "I knew she was a heavyweight whose music was far beyond any so-called folk-rock person I'd ever heard. And, we found we worked really well together. It's like musical Ping-Pong in the studio."

Still, he is hesitant to accept responsibility for Joni's latest musical incarnation, which began on *For The Roses* and evolved into *Court And Spark* — the jazzy underpinnings.

"When I go to work for someone for the first time, I usually tend to underplay it because I know how people can be. But with Joni it was different, because as gifted and talented and fantastic as she is, she has no technical knowledge whatsoever. She didn't even know the names of the notes on the piano. It's all feeling and instinct.

"I remember I was in the studio trying



Neal Preston

to find this voicing on the piano that I would later translate to woodwinds and I said to her in the booth, 'Is this a Cm7 with a . . . well, some technical question. There was a long silence and then she pushed the button down and said, 'Tom, ignorance is bliss.' And that was it. From there, I was on my own and as I started to work with her I learned I could take chances and do things very harmonically advanced for the style and idiom, and she loved it. I couldn't seem to go too far out for her and once I found that out, I tried to go with my first impulses. So in a sense we were both responsible because it took her to respond to what I was doing. She's a perfectionist, regardless of her lack of technical ability, and that's something I responded to immediately."

Scott's even considered having Joni scat-sing on one of his purely instrumental albums. "Some of the things on *For The Roses* were me playing and Joni singing, perfectly doubled in terms of speed, vibrato and tone. You couldn't tell the difference. You bet I've thought about it. Her voice is a great instrument."

Although he had worked in various bands, Scott's first try at recording his own material came after he was signed to Impulse by Bob Thiele. He did two albums with the Tom Scott Quartet and when Thiele quit to form Flying Dutchman Records, Scott followed and did two more records. Meanwhile he'd also been doing sessionwork on over 100 albums and jamming Tuesday nights at the

Baked Potato, Don Randi's (remember the piano at the end of Neil Young's "Broken Arrow") intimate jazz club in North Hollywood that serves 15 varieties of baked potato and is a hangout for local jazz talent.

The L.A. Express took shape there, gradually, centered around Scott and drummer/friend Johnny Guerin. Finally, with the addition of bassist Max Bennett and the Crusaders' pianist, Joe Sample, it "started to feel like a band. The attendance started to soar and the same people came back again and again. I knew," said Scott, "that maybe there was something to it after all."

The four headed for Caracas, Venezuela, and the 1973 Onda Nueva Jazz Festival. It tightened their chops, and on returning they were ready to record. Scott had already done a fifth album, this time for A&M, called *Great Scott* (which contained "Woodstock"), and was looking to go into the studio again. But due to A&M's "general attitude of indifference toward the instrumental music things they'd done in the past year" and the fact that he thought himself about to be dropped, Scott couldn't seem to make the connection.

An engineer friend took up his cause with Ode Records' Lou Adler, who let him come in and do a session at Ode's expense. Scott then toured with Carole King and soon Adler asked him to do some more recording. By this time, the band had decided to add guitarist Larry Carlton to augment its sound and take

some pressure off Scott as the lead instrument. With Carlton and Scott doubling lead lines on guitar and sax, it turned out to be the key to the band's sound. They continued recording for Adler and "pretty soon we had an album."

Scott, who had already worked on *For The Roses*, asked Joni to come listen to the new band. "She did and she loved it," Scott explained, with a knowing grin. "Then, very timidly, she asked if the guys might be interested in playing on a few tracks on her new album." Scott said he thought they might work something out. "The gears were already turning in my head and I suspected that it would likely grow into something more productive. As it turned out, we did the whole album."

The success of the Crusaders' "Put It Where You Want It" late last summer forced Sample to leave the band after *Court And Spark*, as did Carlton, who went to pursue a solo career. But the band had commitments to tour with Joni, so with ten days left to rehearse, Scott began teaching replacements (ex-Jimmy Witherspoon guitarist Robin Ford and keyboardist Roger Kellaway) all of Joni's and the band's material — a total of 22 songs.

The rest, as they say, is history, with the tour a huge success and shows being recorded in Berkeley, New York and Los Angeles for a future live album.

As for the future of the L.A. Express, Scott is optimistic. They were well received on the tour, another album is planned and with Adler's backing and their Joni Mitchell credits, the band is crossing over into the pop field.

"I think a lot of people are looking for a group that will marry the things they like about rock — the funkiness, earthiness and downness — with the more cerebral elements of jazz. I think there's definitely a way it can be done and I hope the L.A. Express will be the band to do it."

Bangla Desh II

Continued from Page 18

agreed to was to listen to the idea.

Other names on the telegram were Helen Reddy, Roberta Flack, Harry Nilsson, Ringo Starr, Garfunkel, Seals & Crofts, Denver, Richie Havens and Richard Pryor. Seals & Crofts confirmed their interest in participating. Reddy's husband and manager, Jeff Wald, expressed dismay over the Lennon dispute, saying, "It leaves us with mixed emotions." Flack's management said that they were unaware that her name had been used until a week after the press conference. "Of course she's in favor of the cause," publicist Henry Hecht said, "but nothing was cleared with her business manager and attorney." The others on the list were unavailable for comment at presstime.

Scali and Viner say the benefits will help to raise money in five ways: ticket sales (a probable \$10 to \$25 price range); sale of closed-circuit TV rights; the broadcast of a TV special; record sales (a double album); and sale of merchandising rights for items such as T-shirts. Viner added later that a film deal also was in negotiation.

The planners hope to avoid the money disputes that have held up disbursement of some of the proceeds from the Concert for Bangla Desh. Viner said Scali and U.N. Undersecretary Bradford Morse have "gone to great extremes to walk this through with Internal Revenue, to make sure it gets the best possible tax breaks." And, he said, artists would be paid only expenses, including transportation and accommodations.