

'Songwriter Of Extraordinary Talents'

By John S. Cullinane

ELVIS COSTELLO "My Aim Is True"

But is your guitar loaded with blanks? Elvis Costello is an unlikely character to be carrying the banner of Britain's New Wave rock across the seas to the American marketplace. It's too soon to tell what his impact here will be, but in his homeland this former computer programmer was an overnight success.

On those rare occasions when Elvis Costello comes to mind, so does a composite of Southside Johnny and Graham Parker with a touch of Steve Gibbons. We might throw some Woody Allen in there, too, on the basis of appearance.

It would be too easy to dismiss Costello as a Graham Parker sound-alike but his singing is phrased in much the same way and his back-up band plays even more basic rhythm and blues than Parker's. Add the fact that both frontmen are nothing but skin and bones and the match-up is almost complete.

aim on the beat on a tune which is really incredibly simple. Browne has made a career of writing simple, beautiful songs that are beautifully simple.

On another live recording called "The Load-Out," Browne pays musical tribute to his roadies and then the audience. It must have been warming live but it's sappy here. The best part came when Browne, playing piano, sings: "Now we got country and western on the bus, R & B, we got disco in eight tracks and cassettes in stereo . . ." Drummer Russell Kunkel plays about a bar of each lest we forget how easy it is for the drummer to change the entire character of the music in a second.

Perhaps the best cut on the album is a Lowell George, Valerie Carter, Jackson Browne composition, "Love Needs A Heart." It's set to a slow to medium tempo which gives Browne his best vehicle for phrasing and the back-up singers a chance to rally 'round their leader.

STILLWATER "Stillwater"

It was only a matter of time and a lot of work in smoky nightclubs before

Stillwater got that first recording contract. It was hard to go unobserved in Macon, Ga., the band's home town which is also home base for Capricorn Records, the company that signed them.

The high-water mark of this debut is in the instrumental department. It is on the vocal parts that the band occasionally steps into puddles. Too often lead singer Jimmy Hall tries to force his square voice into round holes. He needs to relax.

The sound is definitely Southern although somewhat in a pop vein. Apparently, the guitar-dominated band is trying hard to be more than a good jamming band playing by the seat of its pants. The format is a good idea but the songwriting must see some improvement first. In the meantime, this band blessed with three guitarists can jam with the best of them.

Stillwater tries to use its show-stopper guitarist Mike Causey to great effect on the lengthy "Sam's Jam" but even he gets a trifle boring owing to the song's slow takeoff. There are breaks in this tune reminiscent of something by St. Louis' own Mama's Pride but not quite as good, of course. The St. Louis boys sound more "Southern" than these good

'ol boys from Macon any day of the week.

Stillwater's vocals are not all hapless. Some well-balanced harmonies on an acoustic love song called "April Love" prove that. But this band's musical identity is still a mystery unless one looks to its sole commercial success with "Mind Bender."

JONI MITCHELL "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter"

This is one of those albums guaranteed to win new fans and lose old ones for Joni Mitchell. It must rank as one of the more esoteric albums of 1977, but is only occasionally hard to listen to.

The foundation of the music is provided by Mitchell on guitar and the ethereal playing of bassist Jaco Pastorius. There is a lot of other-worldly percussion and it fits the melodies.

This is an ambitious undertaking that is not always an entertaining one. That Mitchell may be missing the boat with all this exotica is evident by how beautiful the one composition featuring only voice and guitar sounds by contrast. Then again, this was my first opportunity to hear recorded ankle bells and coffee cans. . .