

STEREOSCOPIES

TALES FROM TOPOGRAPHIC OCEANS Yes Atlantic SD2-908

Another album by Yes has been released and there is speculation as to its worth. Lacking the highly charged emotionalism of earlier efforts, it seems to represent both a regression and progression.

The lyrical content and thematic line are taken from the text of Paramhansa Yogananda's "Autobiography of a Yogi." More specifically, a footnote on page 83 of that publication. Although several lines do have a bit of subjective importance, the majority appears to be pseudo-mystical bullshit. Stated in four movements, each of which covers an album side, the words quickly become tedious, tending to detract from the music. The music itself is excellent, if not inspirational, and highly listenable.

The question seems to be not whether or not the album is a valid musical statement, since all music is, subjectively, but whether it measures up to previous efforts of the group. Earlier albums had this feeling of imminent action, an event or happening seemed to lurk within the music, waiting to burst forth with a blaze of glory. Now it seems as though the event has passed, and they're waiting for the wheel of fortune to turn around to that area again. Mellowed out, might be a way of describing this, but it hardly seems to help the music. At least two album sides too long, TALES FROM TOPOGRAPHIC OCEANS is pleasant, if disappointing. —JWM

KEEP YOUR LAMP TRIMMED AND BURNING Fred McDowell Arhoolie 1068

It was through Fred's work on "I Don't Play No Rock And Roll" (his only Capitol LP) that I first came to appreciate the complexity of country-blues and find pleasure in the distinctive sound of the bottleneck style of guitar play. Fred's ever-expressive voice, rich with its gospel overtones and his singing, piercing guitar lines combined in a sound at once so simple in form but so complex in content. His renditions of long-time personal favorites like "Baby Please Don't Go" and "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl" became the rendition's most often played on my turntable. Later, after repeated exposure to other McDowell albums, I came to realize the comparative inferiority of that Capitol LP, particularly when compared to his best recorded work, that for a small Berkeley-based independent label, Arhoolie Records. Those discs, (Arhoolie 1021 & 1027) contained consistently superior recordings of blues and spirituals all marked by Fred's "make the guitar say what I say" style. That style was a fondness for guitar used as a voice. Lyrics held meaning not simply as a vocal device but instead were a melody line which could be sung by voice or by guitar, or by alternating or combining both. This, in conjunction with his talent for both rhythmic subtleties and melodic ornamentation, distinguished his style from his contemporaries and brought him popularity unequalled by any other Delta bluesman.

Following his death in July of 1972, quite a few previously-unissued-material albums were released, but none approached the quality of the best of his earlier work, or none, at least, until the release of Arhoolie's KEEP YOUR LAMP TRIMMED & BURNING in Dec. 1973.

The album is comprised of unreleased material recorded during Fred's various Arhoolie sessions. The songs are not outtakes but originals of high quality.



Side One is devoted to spirituals, the first two of which were recorded "live" at the Berkeley Folk Festival, 1965. One of these, "Amazing Grace," was a McDowell favorite and here he gives the slow near dirge-like piece a superb reading, full with a sense of melancholy counter-balanced by hope or more so, spiritual faith. The feeling one experiences from the song is real emotion not contrived as in the popstar Rod Stewart manner. The remainder of side one features two McDowell session pieces and two songs on which Fred's backed by the choir from his native Como, Mississippi church, the Hunter's Chapel Singers.

Side Two is blues, all blues; "Don't Look for Me on a Sunday," "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl," "Little Girl, Little Girl" and "Levee Camp Blues." All are solo numbers with the exception of "Levee Camp Blues" on which Fred is joined by Johnny Woods, a harp player out of the Little Walter mold (aren't they all?).

On KEEP YOUR LAMP TRIMMED & BURNING you'll hear a musician sensitive to the blues form as only a very few are. The rhythms which may at a quick listen sound redundant, you'll find in actuality to be rich with subtleties. You'll hear melodies embroidered, expanded and starkly restated by Fred's impassioned voice and guitar. While this album is not as effective as Fred McDowell Vols. 1 & 2, it is a very good country-blues album and "one" of Fred's best.

If you're just beginning to appreciate bottleneck or slide style guitar, you'll find Fred to be one of that method's most astute practitioners. If you're wanting a suggestion on a good starting point for the enjoyment of country-blues, Fred's a sane, safe and satisfying bet.

—Greg Leonard

BACK INTO THE FUTURE Man UA-LA179-H2

Recently, I heard on the radio about a new group called Man. So, when I ran across the album BACK INTO THE FUTURE, in my bi-weekly search of the promo records, I ignored it. Later on, I relented, and decided to listen to it, and immediately smacked myself on the head.

It's great! I enjoy spacy music, with some semblance of musical direction. Not only is Man spacy, it boogies, and even occasionally breaks into an erstaz Gregorian chant. Immensely entertaining, the album maintains its excitement

through four album sides, a feat other bands have found quite difficult. Solid guitar playing, flashy keyboards, and assorted electronic effects complement the steady drums and bass.

It's a good one. And it's outrageous when the volume's way up. —JWM

TUBULAR BELLS Mike Oldfield Virgin VR13-105

TUBULAR BELLS has been receiving a goodly share of press notoriety, including "some" rave reviews. One-man-band Mike Oldfield capably plays various electric and acoustic guitars, assorted percussion, glockenspiel, flageolet, Farfisa, Lowrey and Hammond organs, piano and grand piano, concert tympani, bass guitar, tubular bells and a few more. Unfortunately, Mike gives no indication that his composition skills are comparable to his obvious instrumental abilities. The music takes the form of two episodic pieces (one on each side), each organized "Bolero" style from a basic theme that's embellished as it's systematically restated using different instruments and thereby creating different textures and tone colors. All this comes off as harmless but a bit redundant. The story goes that Ravel wrote his famous "Bolero" in a fifteen-minute period before an evening's concert. Somehow I'll bet it took Mike much longer to compose much less.

There's lots of muzak, er music, here, but little conceptual ingenuity and no inventiveness beyond elementary levels. This album is supposedly the basis for the soundtrack of "The Exorcist." By next year you'll hear this LP as background music in offices...maybe..... Penny's....Sears...Wards.....

—Greg Leonard

1990 The Temptations Gordy/Motown

A year after their blockbuster success with the 12-minute "Papa Was a Rolling Stone" on the album "All Directions," the Temptations, with producer Norman Whitfield, are still trying to do it again. With few results.

Some found "Papa Was a Rolling Stone" boring and slick. Almost over-produced it was. But I liked its stoned-mellow, ever-slightly-changing repetitive-ness.

This newest entry by the Temptations tries to strike fire again, even to the extent of having a long "major opus," but it's

almost nothing but slick production this time, pointing up the usual thinness of both the words and the music.

Side One opens with "Let Your Hair Down," an embarrassing message song to white American businessmen. "I Need You" rocks slightly. "Heavenly" is awful, the worst of late-40's cocktail lounge music. "You've Got My Soul on Fire" generates some excitement in its 4 minutes, so just ignore its gratuitous allusion to Sly Stone. "Ain't No Justice" tries hard and does move a bit but finally flounders for lack of any musical idea at all.

The second side goes sci-fi with only 2 selections. The first is the title song, "1990," a watery protest number with a moderate beat that never really cooks. The other is "Zoom," a 14 minute song. Yeah, dig man, cats on the corner rapping, UFOs in Mississippi, moon shots, fadeout to insistent simplistic beat, zzzooooommmmm singing the high voices, then Sly's "Higher" again, all stretched out ad nauseam. It has some really fine moments, but it never sustains them, and the conceit is pretentious.

Forget it—unless you're a Temptations bitter-ender.—Dr. John Mood

COURT AND SPARK Joni Mitchell Asylum 7E-1001

Joni Mitchell is no ordinary songwriter. Rather than write and sing a melody to an arranged accompaniment, she creates musical paintings using her unique talent for combining lyrical imagery and perfectly executed sounds. COURT & SPARK, her sixth album released in as many years, contains her most elaborate musical paintings produced to date.

"Help Me" is the album's best song. It has a light, far ranging melody that contains difficult vocal intervals and rhythmic phrasing. You'll like the words and music but you won't be able to sing them. Joni Mitchell's oldest lyrical theme—the ambivalence of a love affair—is partly explained by the chorus:

"We love our lovin'
But not like we love our freedom."

Two new vocal tools are used by Joni Mitchell in COURT & SPARK. As first performed in "Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire" recorded a year ago, she continuously slides her voice in pitch from one precise note to the next with a fascinating rhythmic effect, particularly in "Court and Spark" and "Troubled Child." In "Twisted" she omits all vocal tremolo, giving the song an unusual degree of clarity and richness. Composed in 1965 by Ross and Grey, this is the first song recorded by Joni Mitchell that she didn't write. Probably chosen for its autobiographical content, "Twisted" makes good use of her vitalic humor (remember her laugh at the end of "Big Yellow Taxi"?) and taunts the stern advocates of common sense.

A recent lyrical theme of Joni Mitchell's is given in "A Free Man in Paris," a fast-driving song which tells of a popular musician's longing for his anonymous past. With several voices yodeling together across large melodic intervals she sings:

"You know I'd go back there tomorrow,
But for the work I've taken on,
Stoking the star makin' machinery
Behind the popular song."

COURT & SPARK shows that the burden of fame has not hampered Joni Mitchell's creativity, and that she intends to continue stoking machinery built more for moving musical frontiers than for making stars.—George Grider