

Three Who Sing Their Own Songs

By ELLEN SANDER

JERRY JEFF WALKER, one of the solo singers surviving the explosion of rock groups, can now be heard on his first album, *Mr. Bojangles* (Atco SD 33-239). The song that gives the album its title is a masterpiece of a pop song, one of the finest contemporary folk poems ever set to melody.

Its first public airing came about a year and a half ago during an underground radio show over WBAI, on a midnight-to-when-ever-they-feel-like-going-off-the-air affair called *Radio Unnameable*, hosted by Bob Fass. On that night, Walker and his long-time accompanist, David Bromberg, came up to the studio with their guitars and stayed to play and sing for hours. At 4 A.M., they did "Mr. Bojangles" and a girl called the station and said it was like not being alone any more.

*

Bojangles is a weathered tattered, itinerant street dancer with a liking for the bottle. Walker transfigures him and dances him through dreams and tales of streets immemorial, the way a puppeteer dances a marionette through its paces. Meanwhile, Bromberg plays a nimble guitar countermelody which patters and highsteps like the wizened old man's shoes.

Though they must suffer a bit by comparison, Walker's other songs measure well against "Mr. Bojangles." "Gypsy Songman," a portrait of the artist as a Greenwich Village minnesinger, is as cunning a songsketch and as colorful a folk myth as "Mr. Bojangles." "Little Bird" is a soft, evanescent love song with an elegance born of simplicity and immediacy. "I Makes Money, Money Don't Make Me" is a down-home, nitty-gritty statement of integrity. "The Ballad of the Hulk" is a long, scathing, free-form monologue done in talking-blues style, pleasantly reminiscent of Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues." "My Old Man," a song about the artist's father, closes the album tenderly.

*

Walker's voice is supple and luxurious and his songs are handcrafted, skillfully constructed and buffed to a



David Gahr

Joni Mitchell
Fascinated with changes

rich luster. His subject matter is homespun, rustic and as curiously inglorious as the old gentleman described in "Mr. Bojangles."

The programming on the album is significantly well effected. There is a comfortable balance of material, which results in a genuine unity. The arrangements—which are particularly tasteful, and sensitive to the artist's nuances—explore different textures of the single tonal quality Walker and his guitar supply. As an album of a solo artist's work, this one is outstanding.

*

Joni Mitchell's songs are the product of her fascination with changes of heart, changes of mind, changes of season and changes of self. She's written, in "Both Sides Now" and "Circle Game," two stunningly simple parables of life that have been recorded by dozens of other artists: Judy Collins, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Dave Van Ronk, Tom Rush, to name but a few, and that is why this very independent artist did not include them in her initial

album, *Song to a Seagull* (Reprise 6293).

Joni Mitchell writes and sings of the people and places she's been, from the windy Saskatchewan prairies where she was raised to the seaside which entrances her and to the big cities. Her lyrics are poetic portraits, artistically detailed and honest. Her melodies are exotic, taking unusual turns in time and tone. She takes the listener on a wistful journey in her quest for honesty, in her search for human values.

*

The songs about herself are songs for today's independent young woman and the peculiar problems she faces. "I Had a King" is a sad, backward glance at the artist's broken marriage, without bitterness or self-reproach. "Cactus Tree" speaks of today's young divorcee on the rebound, "so busy being free." "Nathan La Franer" is her definitive comment on New York City cab drivers.

It would be good to be able to say that "Song to a Seagull" is as successful an album as Joni Mitchell is a performer and composer. But the engineering is uneven, her voice sometimes sounds shaky. The songs, accompanied only by Miss Mitchell's guitar, beg for adornment and their sequence works to decided disadvantage of the material. The effect is monotony, albeit a gentle monotony. Any one of these frailties would ruin an album

of a lesser talent, but "Song to a Seagull" offers rewards in spite of itself.

After several disappointing tries, someone has finally recorded Tim Hardin the way those of us who have seen him live know him. *Tim Hardin 3* (Verve Forecast FTS-3049) is an immensely satisfying album, containing rare performances of the artist's best-known material, "The Lady Came From Baltimore," "If I Were a Carpenter," "Misty Roses," "Red Balloon," and "You Upset the Grace of Living When You Lie." The jazzy backup ensemble complements and embellishes Hardin's trembly, aching voice, which floats in the unlikely middleground between folk and jazz, far removed from the gusto of pop. Hardin is a truly individual phenomenon, a man and a voice and songs that reveal his pain and hopes and fears. He strikes a crippling blow at human indifference.

*

He stands vulnerable in the midst of his music, articulating despair and loneliness, questioning the things that are lacking between people and, finally, questioning himself. There is deep comfort in Hardin's songs, as well as a document of feelings, which run almost too deep to be controlled. In the communication of these feelings, the sharing of human pain and hope, lies the very highest sort of art.