

pop albums

JONI MITCHELL: "Blue" (Reprise). Yes, it's all here... the plangent guitar, the moody, swirling piano, the wistful, yearning songs, the beautiful blue sleeve with the brooding cult-image portrait. Everything we need for another volume of vicarious heartache.

Guess that's a pretty sour way to begin a review of what, in many ways, is Joni's most perfect album. But then her songs have come to mean so much to me over the years that my reactions to this album are hopelessly subjective and ambivalent.

The problem, I suppose, is one of empathy. Her songs are autobiographical and one's reaction to them depends to a large extent on how far one can relate to the experiences she describes. On her previous albums she has dealt with the joys and sorrows of love: the communication has been direct and often (particularly on her first album, which dealt with the aftermath of her unhappy marriage) sharply poignant.

But now, as they say, the scene changes. The success of those songs has made her a Rock Star, a member of the new elite, able to fly on a whim from Laurel Canyon to Amsterdam or Spain or the Aegean Islands. The songs here reflect the hang-ups of such an existence and, for me at least, it's hard to relate to them. There is little pain of passion here: where once she described the nightmare of city life in "Nathan La Freniere" she now muses on the sweet dilemma of being stuck in Paris when she wants to be in California.

It's an inevitable process, and one which has already affected artists like James Taylor, Neil Young and Van Morrison. We elect our heroes because they tell us truths about life but their very success divorces them from our field of experience. We go on digging them only by becoming, in effect, vicarious Rock Stars. Showbiz is dead but its spirit lives on in the superstar syndrome.

None of it is Joni's fault, of course. Her songs continue to reflect her own reality, but where once the truths she distilled were universal, the songs here tend to be inward-looking. The slightly claustrophobic atmosphere is underlined by the cosy presence of Messrs Stephen Stills and James Taylor.

But if her lyrics are less satisfying her songs are musically (and in particular, melodically) stronger and more assured than ever. Each song seems not to have been worked out but to have been born whole and perfect and complete with shining guitar and velvety piano. The songs are concerned with the men ("All I Want," "My Old Man," "A Case Of You") and the places ("California") or both ("Carey") in her restless life and several express an underlying theme: a love/hate relationship with the Rock milieu, voiced in these lines from "A Case Of You": "I'm frightened of the Devil and I'm drawn to those that ain't afraid." Or this from "Blue": "Well everybody's saying that Hell's the hippest way to go/Well I don't think so but I'm going to take a look round it though." Her singing is more adventurous than ever, scaring and swooping in the space of a single syllable in a way that recalls Laura Nyro.



JONI MITCHELL: hard to relate

It is, perhaps, as a singer of exquisite, richly-contoured, beautifully singable songs, rather than anything more profound, that she now has her greatest strength. All I know is that despite everything I've said above, this album hasn't been off my turntable in five days. — A.L.

PETE DELLO and friends: "Into Your Ears" (Nepentha). A beautifully refreshing little album if you like soft songs, composed with a sense of humour, feeling for romance and old-fashioned charm. Pete Dello should be remembered as leader of the now defunct

Honeybus ("I Can't Let Maggie Go.") He has always been a rather reluctant performer, if productive writer, but here at last we have a dozen of his efforts which show he is a distant musical relation to Ray Davies. We have the definitive version of his sad, short song "Do I Still Figure In Your Life," which has been heavily recorded by other perceptive artists. Pete's earthy voice and simple, telling delivery of this poignant, very real song make it tremendously touching. "Uptight Basil" is another pretty, observant song: "You don't know what you've got/Don't believe in anything you see/You're wrapped up in your own potato crop/Living In your own pacific pond/And who am I to tell you/That it's all up the creek/Who am I to tell you/That your head's a little weak/You'd only say that you ain't reached your peak." The tunes are almost painfully simple; that's their beauty. Listen to the summery feel of "It's The Way," the modest lyrics of "Go Away," and the honest reality of many other lines on the album. It's an outstanding album that's been too long in

coming; let's hope Pete Dello is inspired to write more songs with such graceful stories, such off-beat simplicity. — R.C.

JOHN SEBASTIAN: "Cheapo-Cheapo Productions Presents Real Live John Sebastian" (Reprise). On stage, there are a handful of artists who can really communicate with their generation with an almost unspoken rapport. Sebastian is in the vanguard of this breed of musician: his big kick is love, and audiences across America simply fall in love with the warmth and understanding he seems to radiate. His way with his crowd is to show them he knows their fears, hopes, loves, dislikes and very moods. It's a purely abstract thing, but Sebastian's smile seems to work. It's all here on this album, made at four shows in California, his strongest territory. He comes on with plenty of humility in his songs, allows the crowd to see his vulnerability by admitting he doesn't know the full words to some songs, and performs most of the songs they want. All his biggies are here: "Lovin' You," "Nashville Cats," "Younger Generation," "Dar'In' Be Home Soon" and more. We've heard the songs before, but in the context of a live show, they become more potent and John sounds more real discussing the songs with his fans. A bit of a luxury LP if you already have Sebastian adequately covered in your collection, but still a friendly album by a sunny artist. — R.C.

KATE TAYLOR: "Sister Kate" (Atlantic). They've really pulled out ALL the stops on this. An exemplary line-up of musicians accompany Kate on her first LP, reading like a 1971 who's-who in Los Angeles music. They include James Taylor, Carole King, Russ Kunkel, Linda Ronstadt, Danny Kootch, the Memphis Horns, Merry Clayton, while Kate's manager Peter Asher is credited with background vocals and clapping. The songs, too, are chosen with discrimination, and show Kate's strong allegiance to Carole King's material, featuring "Home Again," and "Where You Lead" opening the two sides. Elsewhere, we have fine songs like "Country Comfort," "Do I Still Figure In Your Life," "Be That Way," "Handbags And Gladrag," "You Can Close Your Eyes" and

How true is 'Blue'?

"Sweet Honesty." If Kate's vocals produced more light and shade, more heart and more emphasis, it could have been a winning album. But the record relies too much on her punch, together with some dazzling instrumental work, to pull it all together. Kate sounds like she loves singing and tries desperately hard to get inside the lyrics. Time may mature her into a significant singer who does not need to lean on an all-star bill to make an entertaining album. — R.C.

ANDY ROBERTS: "Home Grown" (B&C). Now this is an excellent album. Andy Roberts is one of those names that might just figure on many people's shopping lists under the heading "improbables" — and I'd like to change that heading to "necessities," for I feel a lot of people should give this pleasing, and open selection of songs and pieces, some considerable ear-time. Roberts has a family following (me included) who always attach a sense of respect and admiration for songs that aren't going to make you preach psalms of instant, frenzied admiration — rather better to gently lay a little Roberts music on guests, and wait for them to ask who it is — 'cause they always do. Well, here's "Home Grown" — and simply that's Roberts. It's a mood of music that has all the qualities of mum's cooking, you know, simple things done good and friendly. But he's not Sunday lunch — you don't get bloated, just nicely filled. "Just For The Record" is a clever little guitar piece, "Applecross" is one of the more instantly appealing tracks because it's straight verse and chorus with a pleasing country/folk feel. In fact these are nearly all straight songs with no bumbling attempt at the zany, and that's pleasing on the ear. Andy is joined by a series of obviously interested and appreciative musicians, including the admirable Gordon Huntley. It's country, it's delightful, it's good. — R.H.

PETER HAMMILL: "Fool's Mate" (Charisma). Wow! Pete Hammill with a bag of short sweet songs — and darned fine songs at that. I can see the words "sell-out" bubbling from your mouths already, but hold it, and take heed for you couldn't be further off the line. As Peter explains in the sleeve notes, this solo album

isn't a statement of where Peter is at with Van der Graaf at the moment, more a diary of the shape of years past. Songs, yes, songs that have been in Peter's head for some while, and have just had to be laid down — not purely for the sake of it, for they stand up on their own, stand good, high and proud. I've always had a secret longing to groove to a funky number while mouthing the lines "Imperial Zeppelin, Imperial Zeppelin — It's so Imperial!" Well, the whole thing's there, and with producer John Anthony leading a manly, rather pub piano and stout choir, dare I say it's a positive gas. After that Peter slips into the somewhat melancholic chapter of writing, which is so much the magic of his pen. On "Candle" he's joined by the beautiful mandolin of Lindisfarne's Ray Jackson to produce a suitably sad and reflective painting. "Solitude," and "Vision," are also in that framework of enjoyable, and mind-resting doom so strikingly sacred to Peter's train of writing. Then we turn sides and get into "Sunshine," which as the title suggests is a bopping, almost McCartney-like jest. For my money the musical brilliance, and lyrical honesty of "Child" give more insight to what Peter is about (although may be he'll swear it's a case of WAS about) than anything else on the album. Taking in "Viking" (compliments to Ray Jackson again for such intense harmonica), and the solitary confinement of "I Once Wrote Some Poems," and you've got what must surely be one of THE albums of the year. It's worth noting that Peter is joined by a colourful squad of some of our best, young musicians — Bob Fripp, Rod Clements, and Van der Graaf's Dave Jackson, Hugh Banton, and old friend Nic Potter. It's so imperial! — R.H.

COLIN SCOT: "Colin Scot" (United Artists). Colin Scot (nee Thistlethwaite) is one of those cats who spend much of the year fitting around this country's small folkclubs, playing to intimate numbers of people and generally getting it on in a quiet, unspectacular way. This album represents an attempt to spread himself a little more broadly and possibly move on a little from what he has been doing in the past few years. He got together with a bunch of his friends,

like producer John Anthony and songwriters Davy Johnstone, Harvey Andrews and Martin Hall, and went into Trident earlier this year to record. The result is a mellow, low-key exercise in introspection, that uptempoes occasionally but basically looks inwards. It's an album very much in that mood, a frame of mind circumscribed by the first and final songs, "Do The Dance Now, Davey" and "Here We Are In Progress," both written by Hall, which are wreathed in bitter melancholia. "Progress" has a line which goes, "Feeling like a shadow in an undertakers dream," and the former song is an ennui-laden tale of down-and-out and spiritually washed-up buskers who hang around Leicester Square. Great songs, but doomy. The paradox is that Scot himself is an extremely outgoing guy and it all trips off his lips most unfamiliarly. There lies the fault of the album. Scot often sounds uncomfortable with what is going down, as if he's unsure where he's placing his feet. Having decided he doesn't want to be just folksy, he's struck out on a new course and found himself in intermediate territory. Though the album establishes a feeling, it doesn't create an identity for its singer. It's more a setpiece for the songs, and though several of these are excellent, like Mike Newbury's balladic "Zaby In My Lady" and Colin's own "My Rain," I'm sure that wasn't what he had in mind. I'm really sorry 'cause I know the guy. — M.W.

JAMES GANG: "Thirds" (Probe). The James Gang have got themselves one of the best publicists in the business, a certain P. Townshend, who it seems is kind of nuts about them. He says of the group's guitarist, Joe Walsh: "he really is one of those guys I kind of go nuts about." Now far be it from me to cross swords with Townshend, but I reckon this ultra-ecstasy about the band is a little misjudged. Their last two albums have been good rock stuff, a little low on dynamics, but enough to indicate the group's self-assuredness. A tour of this country with the Who last October confirmed these impressions. In no way, though, does the band stick me as being anything particularly special. This album here is certainly the best they have put out; it's extremely thoughtful, well produced (by the band and Bill Szymczyk) and very acceptable to tired ears. At the same time it lacks tension and seems one-dimensional as far as mood and feeling goes. The fault is in the compositions, all of which are written by the band, and half of them by Walsh. Most of the cuts are mid-tempo affairs, frequently tinged with country steel, and they suffer from inconsequential lyrics and samey melodies. Now and again they come up with winners, like "Midnight Man" and "Again" (both written by Walsh) which are pretty in a downbeat style, and the best cut, "White Man/Black Man" (composed by bassist Dale Peters), which is a great production job with long climatic guitar ending and backing vocals from the Sweet Inspirations. It becomes obvious after a few plays, however, just how dependent on production the album is. There's nothing wrong with "produced albums," but occasionally it turns out that the sum of the parts is less than the whole. Great attention to detail has been paid on "Thirds" — the nice little violin riff on "Again," for example — but it all adds up to something less than was intended. "I think they are going to be big," says Townshend of the band. I'll be surprised if he's right. — M.W.

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