

## Book Review

# Kasha-Hirshhorn Tome Teaches Songwriting

By DAVID FINKLE

■ If there is one thing most people on God's green earth think they can do, it's write a song. Therefore the market for anecdotes, articles, magazines and especially books on how to pen that unpenned ditty—and then sell it—is what might be called wide; and over the past 50 years (at least) publishers have not been reticent about leaping into the breach. Of the continuing line of breach-fillers the newly issued "If They Ask You, You Can Write a Song" (Simon and Shuster, \$10.95) by Al Kasha and Joel Hirshhorn is one of the best; indeed, one is tempted to forget about hedging bets and throw in with Marvin Hamlisch, who is quoted at the top of the dust-jacket as saying, "the definitive book on songwriting."

Kasha and Hirshhorn, who have been writing and selling songs together for the better part of two decades and have two Oscars apiece to show for it (which they do, also on the dustjacket), have evidently taken copious notes about their experiences; their guide, which is narrated breezily by Kasha, is a division of these notes into chapters on how one goes about getting the song out of one's head and onto records, turntables, stages and screens. It is highly possible—so thorough have the authors been — that there is no stone along the rocky road to pop music-writing success that Kasha and Hirshhorn have neglected to turn over; for instance, I fell out of my reading-chair when their lust after comprehensiveness led, in the chapter "Demo Power!," to this piece of advice: "Occasionally a musician you've booked won't show up. Panic! The absence of a pianist or guitar does cause a gaping hole, especially if you've hired only a quartet, but if another player isn't available in time, you have to do some fast reorganizing. Maybe the piano can contribute a rhythm that will compensate for the guitar's absence. Maybe a more moving bass line can do the drummer's work for it. You'll be astounded how fluidly your mind functions under these crisis circumstances after a while."

Kasha and Hirshhorn, then, have thought of every practical maneuver the aspiring songwriter needs to know—not to mention a few that many professionals may not have thought of.

It's in the realm of the impractical where one might fault the team. They look at songwriting as systematic, as a process that can work if one follows any one

of various formulas; and surely they are right as far as they go. What they don't mention is the importance, once the would-be tunesmith has learned the rules, of rule-breaking, how often it is the avoidance of the mold that leads to success for the best composers and lyricists. One thinks, for example, of the story Bernie Taupin and Elton John tell of writing what they thought, judging by what had gone before, the public wanted but only found something to entice the public when they decided to forget what they'd been told and write to please themselves. Kasha and Hirshhorn do mention the need to find a "voice," but what they don't underline is that the pursuit of the voice as top priority is what separates the front-rank songwriter from the workman, a type of practitioner their book runs the risk—through oversight—of perpetuating.

### Rhyming

Something else perpetuated here is less threatening but annoying nonetheless, and it has to do with rhyme. It has become fashionable, if not cliché, to think of rhyming as a symptom of a dishonest lyric: the implication is that forcing something into a rhyme means stopping the

## Infinity Sets LPs

■ NEW YORK — Gary Mankoff, vice president of marketing/finance for Infinity Records, has announced the release of five albums in October.

The five releases include: "Partners In Crime" by Rupert Holmes; "This Is Our Night" by Bishop & Gwinn; and self-titled albums by Dobie Gray, Orsa Lia, and Native Son.

## REO at The Omni



Epic recording group REO Speedwagon recently played a sold out show at Atlanta's Omni as part of the group's extensive tour in support of their latest album, "Nine Lives." Pictured backstage following the show are, from left: (front) Kevin Cronin, REO; Harvey Leeds, assoc. dir. national album promotion, E/P/A; (rear) Ron McCarrell, VP marketing, E/P/A; Kevin Beamish, engineer on "Nine Lives"; Alan Gatzert and Bruce Hall, REO; Drake Hall, Program Director, WLRS, Louisville; Neal Doughty, REO; Ritch Bloom, regional album promotion manager, E/P/A; Bob Feineigle, dir., national album promotion, E/P/A, Gary Richrath, REO; and John Baruck, manager.

flow of sincere passion that an off-rhyme lets out. Poppycock! Yes, when rhyme muddles sense, it is superfluous and often destructive, but a disregard of rhyme can be seen just as frequently not as honesty but as laziness, a thumbed nose at the listener that sends the message, "Why should I bother to write more carefully; what do they know out there anyway?" Great songs have been written without neat rhyming, but don't ask any consumer to buy "together-forever" or time-mine" as indications that someone with Abe Lincoln's probity is at work.

## Concert Review

### Joni Mitchell Impresses at Forest Hills

■ NEW YORK — Over the last four years and three albums, Joni Mitchell's creative instincts and artistic inclinations have gradually drifted away from the pop music mainstream. But Mitchell's performance at Forest Hills last Saturday night (August 25) indicated she is still able to powerfully merge the aesthetics of her present craft with the contemporary sounds that made much of her past work so appealing.

Standing centerstage with her electric guitar, which she competently chorded and impressively picked throughout the evening, Mitchell opened with a striking set of "Big Yellow Taxi," "Just Like This Train," and "In France They Kiss On Main Street;" always sounding like the confident albeit youthful waif of her earlier career. Even though these songs were played true to their original arrangements, Mitchell's superb utilization of her stellar touring

And also don't as Kasha and Hirshhorn do, tell songwriters aiming at Broadway that they'd better use rhymes because the standards are higher; it's a flimsy means to an uncertain end (two of the acclaimed scores of recent years, "Hair" and "A Chorus Line," have entirely different philosophies about the use of rhyme).

So perhaps "definitive" is not quite the word wanted here (it's a word needing forced retirement anyway), but "helpful," "informative," "necessary" and even "all-but-perfect" certainly apply).

band (Pat Metheny, bass; Lyle Mays, keyboards; Jaco Pastorius, bass; Michael Brecker, tenor and soprano sax; and Don Alias, percussion), collectively and as individual catalysts or embellishments, pumped new vitality into each.

On consecutive numbers like "Paprika Plains" and "Free Man In Paris," Mitchell expertly juxtaposed her free-form jazz poetry (held together by the fiery rhythm section) with her passionate pop melodies (sparked by Brecker's soulful tenor solo). Then, armed solely with her most powerful instrument, her voice, Mitchell launched into an inspired "Sweet Sucker Dance" from the "Min-gus" album, as if possessed by Charlie's spirit. This first taste of her latest project, termed inaccessible by many, was greeted wildly by the audience; partly because of the sheer power of its lyrical content, but mostly due to Mitchell's tremendous vocal range and inflections, her fluid body movements, and affecting hand gestures.

As the concert progressed, a well orchestrated flow was strongly evident as each musician was featured in a succession of intermittent solos and jams. After an eerie "God Must Be A Boogie Man" the Persuasions (they opened the show with their unique a cappella energy) joined Joni for a do-wop "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" with Mitchell's agile lead sending goose bumps out en masse.

As she played the last verse of "Woodstock" (her second encore) over and over again while backstage and out of sight, Mitchell reinforced the feeling that her music, wherever it goes, will always strike that awesome responsive chord.

Joseph Ianello