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Entertainment

Parker strikes right chord with new album

By Sam Geers

"Struck by Lightning," Graham Parker (RCA) — floored in the same upside New York environs as The Band's classic album, this latest work by the feisty British singer/songwriter is an unalloyed triumph of songwriting skill and solid musicianship.

The best of his recent efforts to write songs chronicle his new-found maturity. "A Brand New Book" sums up Parker's outlook: "The words come out/Not tears and sweat/Cause that's not what a grown man writes about."

In typical Parker fashion, it's just across with a jaunty organ riff, crisp handclaps and a sprightly melody that belies the song's serious subject matter.

Jay Ungar's little viola solo provides what may be Parker's most beautiful song ever, "The Kid With the Butterfly Net."

In celebration of the simple joys of childhood seems to have been written for anyone who's ever raised a kid — or been one.

But don't get the idea that Parker's wimped out. "Eris Costello probably will turn green with envy when he hears "The Wants So Many Things," which catalogs the modern obsession with materialism in scintillatingly savage detail.

Parker's unalloyed production suits the songs perfectly. John Sebastian and ex-Band mainstay Garth Hudson suggest the basic band of Parker's Rumour bassist Andrew Rodner and former Eris Costello & the Attractions drummer Pete Thomas.

The classic Hammond organ guided by Hudson and keyboard player Larry Hoppen, together with Parker's occasional harmonica, favorably evokes Dylan's "Blonde on Blonde" sound without slavishly trying to recreate it.

"Struck by Lightning" flags slightly in its second half, but let's not quibble; this is one terrific album.

"Night Ride Home," Joni Mitchell (Geffen) — Following her heyday as one of the quintessential Southern California singer-songwriters, Mitchell confounded some longtime fans with dalliances in jazz styles in the late 1970s.

Recent albums have marked a return to her more traditional style, and the cycle becomes nearly complete with "Night Ride Home."

It's music that has simplified and stripped of extraneous trappings, leaving it to rise and fall that moodily rises on the strength of its songs and Mitchell's quietly intense vocals.

The title track shows Mitchell at her best. Her serene lyrics evoke the feel of the summer evening car ride they describe, right down to chirping crickets in the back-



Graham Parker's "Struck by Lightning" collection is a triumph of songwriting skill and solid musicianship.



Joni Mitchell's "Night Ride Home" marks another step toward her more traditional style after flirting with jazz in the '70s.

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ground. "Ray's Dad's Cadillac" captures a similar automobile-related atmosphere, this time mixed with pleasant nostalgia.

Mitchell turns some especially bitter phrases during the acidic put-down of materialism. "The Windfall (Everything for Nothing)" "You'll eat your young alive/for a jaguar in the drive."

A few of the songs, like "Nothing Can Be Done," reflect Mitchell's way with lyrics but stint on melody.

And, yes, the lengthy adaptation of William Butler Yeats' poem "Sailing Towards Babel" succeeds only at being pretentious and boring.

Fortunately, these are only momentary lapses. Elsewhere, Mitchell's vocals sound more mature and much less flighty than in the past, and there are enough memorable songs such as "Come in From the Cold" to make the "Night Ride Home" rewarding one.

"Tempted," Marty Stuart (MCA) — Welcome to digitally recorded hillbilly music. Stuart's follow-up to his hit country debut, "Hillbilly Rock," continues to draw on time-honored honky-tonk legends such as Bill Monroe, Buck Owens and Johnny Cash for inspiration.

Stuart adds his musical chops and modern production wizardry, and the results can be downright inspiring.

The title track sounds like a rock 'n' roll standard, with its rolling Buddy Holly drumbeat, fat guitar solo and Stuart's edgy vocal.

Johnny Cash's "Blue Train" gets an appropriately atmospheric treatment. Stuart's band nails down the subtle rhythms that make the song unmistakably Cash's, but Stuart's vocal gives it a moody

feel that recalls Chris Isaak. Not everything here quite lives up to those two cuts, but, at just over 30 minutes running time, "Tempted" definitely leaves one wanting to hear more.

"Doubt," Jesus Jones (SIRI) — Of all the British groups attempting to blend sampling, dance music beats and conventional rock structures, none succeeds like Jesus Jones.

This follow-up to last year's "Liquidizer" debut sports at least as many worthy songs. Take "International Bright Young Thing," which sounds like "Revolver"-era Beatles crossed with Depeche Mode at their catchiest.

Or "Real Real Real," its guitar boogie and cheery organ punctuating a sing-along chorus.

The intriguing songs are leaved with musical snippets and sampled sound effects that enliven the proceedings without being overly intrusive.

"Doubt" throbs with noisy life, and underneath its raucous exterior lie some superb songs. Fan stuff.

"Havana 3 A.M.," Havana 3 A.M. (IRS) — Ex-Clash bassist Paul Simonon and company quickly carve out a fresh sound on this debut despite mixing in some familiar elements — "Oh rock 'n' roll, don't regress, Ennio Morricone-style spaghetti western sound tracks and maraca horns.

Even with all those influences, the self-produced album never sounds cluttered.

It's dominated by the band's jumpy rhythm section and Los Angeles club scene fixture Gary Myrick's jagged outbursts of reverbated Niphi Dism formerly fronted the British rockably renaissance Whitehead; his portaled singing is superb throughout.

With its reggae tinged, the single "Reach the Rock" recalls the Clash's rock/reggae hybrids circa "London Calling."

The liberal use of echo and tremolo bar on "Blue Motory, die Eyed" gives it the same kind

chief appeal lie in its visceral, almost abstract rock 'n' roll.

"Green Mind," Dinosaur Jr. (Hire) — The major-label debut for this chunky Massachusetts outfit turns out to be more of a solo outing for its frontman, J. Mascia, than a true group effort.

The absence of Mascia's bandmates helps to explain why Dinosaur Jr.'s music seems to have become more coherent after a series of wild and woolly independent albums.

Mascia has crafted a sound that's the missing link between Neil Young and Paul Westerberg of the Replacements, borrowing the raw instrumental attack of the former and the stretched vocal style of the latter.

"The Wagon" stirs up a dense storm of crackling guitars but manages to keep hold of the song's hooks and the cheer.

"Water" starts innocently as a ballad, but its edgy guitar jabs escalate into a crumbling finale.

Mascia laces "Green Mind" with equal parts melodic acuity and lurking energy, and the results offer challenging and offbeat slants on conventional rock music forms.

He's definitely an artist to watch.

Advertisement for 'ON RECORD' featuring album reviews for 'Struck by Lightning' by Graham Parker, 'Night Ride Home' by Joni Mitchell, 'Tempted' by Marty Stuart, 'Havana 3 A.M.' by Havana 3 A.M., and 'Green Mind' by Dinosaur Jr. The ad includes a photo of Parker and Mitchell, and a list of record stores.