



A Losing Bette!

By William Dart

It is interesting to speculate on what might have become of Bette Midler if the clientele of the New York steam baths had been blessed with taste. What would that nice Jewish girl be doing now? — one-night-stands through the Mid-West in the back chorus line of *Fiddler on the Roof*, finally marrying a man from Montana and helping out on the dental floss farm.

As a sort of one-girl showbiz Yankee Steeleye Span, putting kitsch and camp within reach of the average man on the streets, Bette has had some minor successes. "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" was something of a *succes d'echoc* in 1972, but her version adds little to the original Andrews Sister's one, apart from an-phetamines. Shunting a career that has featured more lows than the average Chaliapin aria, the divine Miss M had proceeded by bumps and grinds until we are treated to her fourth album, *Live at Last*.

Even if we forgive her musical excrescences, who could tolerate a glut of Sophie Tucker jokes, many of which are unfunny in the extreme, and all of which pale beside vintage Tucker patter.

The divine Miss M does tend to paint with rather a bold palette. It probably carries well in a swinging steam bath — or after a sufficient number of cocktails at the Copacabana. Others, however, have done the same with a little more astringency.

When Randy Newman included the Gordon-Revel classic "Underneath the Harlem Moon" in his *Twelve Songs* album, it gained a characteristic Newmannesque irony in lines such as:

*They just live for dancing,
They're never blue for long.
Ain't no sin to laugh or grin,
That's why darkies were born.*

Geoff and Maria Muldaur were amongst the first to review some older songs. Their second album *Sweet Potatoes* includes a charmingly diffident "Dardanella" by Geoff, and a version of Billie Holiday's "Lover Man" by Maria (a number she repeated at her recent Auckland concert). Now work-

ing separately, the Muldaurs frequently use older material in their own albums, from Maria's reading of the surreal little love song "We Just Couldn't Say Goodbye" to Geoff's frenetically disco-ised "Hooray for Hollywood" on his second album.

It may be that the nostalgia boom is rooted in the basic discontent and malaise of our society. As in life so in music. Compared with atom bombs, pollution, energy crises and contemporary political events, even the Depression of the thirties takes on a warm glow. When you've sat through forty-five minutes of Chuck Berry you might well hanker after the harmonic variety, the lyrical freedom and the literate words of the standard popular song of the twenties to the forties.

As well as a dearth of artists today (outside of the cabaret circuit) who know what to do with these songs, we are faced with a rather unimaginative re-issuing policy of the original recordings. The Andrews Sisters' version of "The Coffee Song" (which Osibisa have just disco-ised) is worth scouring junk shops for in 78 form! It doesn't appear on any of their compilation albums. Nor do the classics these girls sang with Danny Kaye — "Civilization (Bongo! Bongo! Bongo!)" and "Beating Banging and Scratching" being two notables.

Some of the Andrews Sisters' recordings have been re-released in versions that the girls themselves recorded in the 'fifties — recordings marred by the Latin American schlock plastered on every second track. Eartha Kitt, that eminent lady of fifties 'cool', has had her LP re-issues ruined in similar fashion.

Who then is using all this material to any advantage these days? Randy Newman, of course, never grew up the R&B way. His songs register in the vein of a latter-day Hoagy Carmichael. In her album *Hejira* Joni Mitchell gives us a song "Blue Motel Room" wherein she has infused her own style into a 1940's mould. And Sparks did a similar feat with "Looks, Looks, Looks" from their *Indiscreet* album. Ian Whitcomb keeps the flag of nostalgia flying with his books *After the Ball* and *Tin Pan Alley*; but his album, *Underneath the Ragtime Moon* has never seen release here.

There have been pleasant surprises here and there: Genevieve Waite's version of Irving Berlin's "Slumming on Park Avenue" (produced by husband John Phillips) and Ronnie Lane's "Brother Can You Spare a Dime" from his *Slim Chance* album. On the local scene, Hello Sailor's "Rum and Coca Cola" was a surprisingly successful recasting of an Andrews Sisters' number — deserving of a bigger success than it ever got.

And then there is that very special man, Ry Cooder, the rich man's Leon Redbone. Cooder takes his material from a variety of sources from Guthrie on the left to Bacharach on the right. And he subjects this material to the most amazing transformations. Who else would give us Jim Reeve's "He'll Have To Go" in Mexican garb?

Back to Bette. Maybe if we all sent her a pair of zircon-encrusted tweezers, she would get the message and ride her pygmy pony off into the setting sun.

SMALL SCOTSMAN MAKES BIG

New Zealand is a funny place. In case you hadn't noticed it, it's a bit out of the way. And this has its good points and its bad points. The good points lie in its way of life. Its probably not the worst place in the world to live.

One of the bad points is communications. There seems to be a cultural filter which cuts down the flow of information from overseas, so that, while the mainstream is well-served (by television for example) minority groups with special interests can suffer from cultural isolation. This has greatly improved over the last few years (certainly as far as music goes) so that papers like *Rolling Stone*, *Melody Maker*, and *New Musical Express* are now readily available throughout most of the country.

I recently heard a Radio Hauraki DJ say on the air that he had never heard of Frankie Miller. I guess you can't blame him for that. Until recently, Frankie has featured prominently in the bargain bins of a few of the local record stores, largely due to lack of airplay and apparent lack of record company backing. Record companies are often unable to predict what will sell, and therefore generally release a bunch of albums on spec. They then deplete or stop promoting those albums that don't sell. It's a sensible and economical policy.

Which is one reason why our boy ain't been selling too well. His first album was released on Chrysalis and went largely unnoticed in New Zea-



land. It's called *Once In a Blue Moon*. There may still be a few copies of it in the sale bins. Buy it. It is a boomer. Frankie's raunchy voice and simple songs are backed by Brinsley Schwarz, a now defunct British pub band (some of whom now play in the *Rumour*, of Graham Parker and the fame). They were a solid working outfit who tended to underplay and go for simplicity, and they gave the songs the power base needed to complement Mr Miller's intense vocals.

The only flaw I could find with OIABM was that the simplicity of the music and the negligible production on the album led to a slight sameness about some of the songs. His second album, *High Life* overcame this problem. It was produced by the master of tight production, Allen Toussaint, and it never misses — every track a gem. The only fault I could possibly find with it is that it is almost too good. With half of the songs written by Allen Toussaint, and his impeccable production and musicians on every track,

some of the rough edges that make Frankie Miller so exciting are gone. But it's worth the loss to hear the combination of two such important artists on the same vinyl.

So who is Frankie Miller? I'm glad you asked. He's a short Scot from Glasgow who's noted for his taste in hats and his vocal ability. He grew up on all the right influences — Little Richard, Ray Charles, Otis Redding — and was singing from the age of four (or so the promo sheet would have us believe). He played in local bands while still at school, and took a job as an electrician when he left. He didn't last long — a familiar story in rock and roll — and began singing with local R'n'B bands for a living. He played with Jim Dewar (of Stone the Crows fame) in a semi-pro soul band called Sock it to 'Em JB. (after a Bar-Kays hit). When that split up he moved to London, and in the late 60's played with the Stoics, an R'n'B band signed to Chrysalis. The Stoics toured Germany with Ten Years After before their demise. Their differences, Frankie says, "weren't musical, they were physical. There were one or two of us who never got along." He then joined Dewar and Robin Trower in Jude, sharing the writing chores with Trower. Clive Bunker (of the original Jethro Tull) played drums. Dewar was later to play in Robin Trower's power trio. When Jude broke up, our boy was out there on his own.

Since going solo, he's had two problems that haven't helped his career. He had no regular band, and he had little or no management. For a while, he was mentioned mainly for sitting in with other bands, in what must have been a fairly friendly scene, the so-called pub rock scene. Eventually he moved to San Francisco, where he got together the band which appeared on his third album, *The Rock*. It was a band which fitted his style of writing and singing more than any of his previous cohorts had done. Their music was raw and powerful, a synthesis of British and American influences. With Henry McCulloch on guitar, Mick Weaver on keyboards, Chrissie Stewart on bass, and Stu Perry on drums, they couldn't fail to be good.

The Rock was written almost totally by Frankie and had the benefit of a sparse production job, courtesy of Elliot Mazer. It's on this record that Frankie's Otis Redding influence is most apparent, particularly on "All My Love", where the Stax-like horn lines and the slow, soulful feel stand out like they were written by Otis himself. It's not the only influence detectable, however, and the overall sound is Frankie Miller, the distillate of all that rhythm and blues.

The latest FM record, *Full House*, is out in New Zealand now. It's brilliant. He has come up with just the right musicians this time, guys with little previous reputation but a real sense of what his songs need. Ray Minhinnet is the best rock guitarist he's had since Brinsley Schwarz (sorry Henry). The rhythm section (Chrissy Stewart, bass, and Graham Deakin, drums) put across a fat bottom line, and Jim Hall is a fine pianist, both as a lead and a rhythm player. The first side is mainly other people's songs, including John Lennon's "Jealous Guy", and a shattering rendition of that great oldie "Love Letters (straight from your heart)". It sounds quite different in Frankie's hands. The second side is mostly F. Miller cuts. They're all so good it's virtually impossible to pick a standout track. The band push harder than just about any you could name, and I think it is his best work yet.

A singer needs three things; talent, good management, and good musicians. Frankie Miller has always had the first, and lately he seems to have connected with the other two. His band is getting rave reviews in Britain. He is now managed by Keith Reid, Procul Harum's lyricist. It looks like it might just do the trick.

More importantly, he has been and is making excellent music. Good music is supposed to make you happy. Frankie Miller's music makes me ecstatic. Try some. See for yourself.

John Malloy



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