

RECORDS

Taking It to the Limit

Joan Armatrading
To The Limit
A&M

On her *Show Some Emotion* recording, Joan Armatrading, native of the West Indian island St Kitts, summons an image that seems particularly suitable to her adopted home in South London. "Woncha Come on Home", is a short plea for the return of a lover. An evocation of urban fear, the song describes its protagonist sitting in a flat of empty rooms, the lights nervously kept on in each. Meanwhile he or she is convinced:

There's a madman
Standing on the corner
And he keeps on looking
At my window

A common misunderstanding of this type of symbol, frequent in Armatrading's work, has hampered Joan Armatrading's reputation. Reported by the press as nervous and reticent, efficiently shy on stage, Armatrading has been assumed an introverted singer-songwriter. One is led to believe a song like "Woncha Come Home" is the personal confession of nights spent in sleepless anxiety.

It may come as a surprise that Joan Armatrading flatly denies she has a confessional urge. In a variety of statements she has said that she writes, not in the first person, but as a dramatist. She places herself in the position of people she knows, sees, imagines. Close examination reveals, for instance, a surprising narrative content on *Show Some Emotion* — one song's about committing armed robbery.

Perhaps it is true that because Armatrading's dramatic scope has been fairly limited, primarily concerned with personal relationships, she has restricted herself. *To the Limit* redresses the balance, for both lyrically and musically this, her newest record, broadens her range significantly.

The primary thing to applaud is the album's execution. Wanting more bite, Armatrading and producer Glyn Johns, opted to record much of the material live in the studio. The result is a marvelously relaxed feeling in the playing which, all the same, contains a spirit and conviction not often found in studio layering.



Joan Armatrading

On the reggae "Bottom to the Top" the band are cohesive, in the more jazz and blues influenced "Barefoot and Pregnant" and "Wishing" plenty of room is left for Armatrading's tone variation and vocal glissandos. Throughout pianist Red Young and sax-player Quitman Dennis add textural highlights with considerable skill and taste.

The musical adroitness of Armatrading's musicians seems a logical extension of remarkably subtle songwriting. On *To the Limit* Armatrading pursues a range of emotions from the spiritual optimism of "Taking my Baby Up-town":

I said
A walk with God is the best

to the bitter and worldly sexual recriminations of "You Rope You Tie Me":

Don't upset, don't embarrass me baby
Don't show your body
Your body don't make it.

Although Armatrading's themes remain constant (love, jealousy, revenge, desire) her grasp of them appears to have gained objective strength. For this reason alone Joan Armatrading deserves to win broader support than she has already with her reputation for introversion.

Bruce Belsham



The Streets Are Safe

Billy Joel
52nd Street
CBS

From the outset, with "Captain Jack" in '72, Billy Joel showed himself to be one of rock's more perceptive wordsmiths. The autobiographical first hit, "Piano Man," ably demonstrated Joel's skill as an acerbic portraitist. It also established his dual person as entertainer and cocksure cynic who both censures and celebrates the bar-rooms and streetlife of his background.

On this, his fifth album, he's still hanging out in the Bronx, and many of the characterizations can be seen as developments from his last album *The Stranger*:

Anthony did claim to be "Moving Out" of the city but seems to have got only "Half a Mile Away". Escape has become escapism, sitting on the sidewalk with cheap wine and a transistor.

The ambitious juvenile of "Vienna" refused to take that advice to "cool it off before you burn it out" so the narrator rails at her excesses in "Big Shot".

There are more "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant" in "Zanzibar".

In writing about women Joel occasionally lapses into the sexist dichotomy of either worshipping them as man's salvation or else envisaging masochistic destruction at the hands of sexual witch. "Rosalinda's Eyes" pays homage to the saintly ideal, while the siren (who nonetheless remained "Always a Woman" on the last album) has become even deadlier, wielding a "Stiletto".

Often the music enhances these scenes: "Big Shot's" thudding hangover is evoked by the pounding piano, and "Stiletto's" introduction of

snapping fingers announces the sophisticated bitch.

Both tunes and arrangements continue *The Stranger's* tendency towards honing the numbers into readily identifiable — and commercial — musical styles. "Until the Night" may be a tribute to Phil Spector and the Righteous Brothers but it's also a sifter for the Humperdinck/Rowles audience. "Big Shot" is uneasily close to Elton John.

Nearly all the numbers are strong and the album's overall standard is comparable to its platinum predecessor. However the peaks are not quite as high. "Rosalinda's Eyes", the closest in style to "Just the Way You Are", is hauntingly beautiful but somehow lacks the earlier song's instant-classic quality (and Phil Woods' alto.) The single, "My Life", is catchy but doesn't accost you as forcefully as "The Stranger" did.

And there are a few failures. The vocal and instrumental sections of "Zanzibar", don't cohere. "Honesty" is just too calculatedly schmaltzy — Joel hasn't the subtlety that Rhymin' Simon used to make this theme work a few years ago.

But as Joel sings, "Melodrama's so much fun," especially if it helps take the album to Number One, as has already happened in the States. It seems the entertainer's cynicism is more smug than bitter these days (see "My Life" for example.)

If his music seems to be increasingly crafted to take over the market once dominated by the likes of Elton John and Neil Diamond, at least Billy Joel's lyric writing continues to work similar turf to Bruce Springsteen. City street pop for suburban living rooms.

Peter Thomson

Is This the Future?

Penetration
Moving Targets
XTC
Go 2
Virgin Records

There are some pessimists who think that the recent creative outburst in the English music scene is over and that most of the new hopes will soon fade away. But they are wrong on both counts if these two albums are anything to go by. On the first score *Moving Targets* the debut by Penetration proves there are still some very impressive bands playing in English garages. On the second count XTC have proved their staying power with *Go 2* which is perhaps superior to their first class debut album.

Penetration have neatly avoided any punk stereotypes. Certainly they are based in the familiar power play but they have developed a stark metallic quality to their sound which is quite distinctive. Much of the credit for this must go to guitarist Fred Purser whose haunting melodic lines put the cutting edge to the band's distinctive hard rock delivery.

But the true star here is vocalist Pauline Murray. Her tone is absolutely chilling but the passion is obviously present in every track. The band uses some quite adventurously sparse arrangements but they almost always work because she is totally convincing.

From an impressive set standouts would be the gorgeous power thrash, "Life's A Gamble" and the slower hard reggae, "Too Many Friends".

One doubt that tends to linger about art rock outfits is that all the experimentation may simply conceal the fact that the bands simply couldn't give a tight performance of a neatly structured melody within a 3-4 minute format. There are no worries on that score with XTC. Inventive and intelligent they are but the delivery is as solid as the hardest headbanger you could ask for.

Andy Partridge doesn't get his chords out of the same book as other rock guitarists. The rhythms are jerky and at first unsettling. The melodies chop and change suddenly. But this band really deserves listening time.

Colin Moulding on bass and Terry Chambers on drums are an amazingly tight rhythm section.



Pauline Murray, Penetration

There is nothing flabby about their execution of the pacier numbers in the set. Nor are Barry Andrews' keyboards the indulgent type. Always witty, never rambling and cleverly underpins the basic structures. But it always comes back to Partridge with his impeccable rhythm work, the sly gems of lead and his stammering vocals.

The best tunes are his too. "Meccanic Dancing" with its jangling metallic riff, the frantic "Red" and the hypnotic "Battery Brides". Colin Moulding's "The Rhythm" is also a standout.

Neither of these albums is what you might call easy listening. But they will amply reward repeated playing. These bands and their like may not be the future of rock 'n' roll but they ought to be.

Dominic Free



Sailor's Second Record

Hello Sailor
Pacifica Amour
Key

If New Zealand records are labelled rarities, how much rarer are follow up albums in this country. For a variety of reasons rock acts tend to make debuts here then either depart to Australia or stay to watch their recording careers wither under the stultifying glare of public indifference.

Second records are so infrequent that it is very, very difficult to know what a follow up should do for a N.Z. band. In reviewing Hello Sailor's *Pacifica Amour*, I am therefore forced to use expectations formed by experience of overseas product which may be neither fair nor appropriate.

Nevertheless follow up albums can do several things. Ideally a second bite of the recording cherry consolidates potential.

Pundits look to follow ups to confirm hopes and doubts, to define impressions. At best one expects to hear irrelevancies pruned, talents sharpened. Often a follow-up involves a two way movement: growth and definition on the one hand and restriction or specialisation on the other.

Hello Sailor have released *Pacifica Amour* to succeed their first L.P. which stands as New Zealand's most successful ever rock record. *Hello Sailor* is an album remarkable for a diversity of influences. Ranging from the reggae of "All Around This Town" to the smooch and swoon of "Lying in the Sand", it is a generous album, a good rock album and an all-rounder's outing at the same time.

Almost inevitably Hello Sailor have activated one half of the classical follow-up process in reducing the eclecticism of the first record.

Pacifica Amour is much more clearly delimited. The sound and style is that which emerged during the last six months of concerts Sailor played here before moving out; the heavy pulse of East Coast U.S. rock and roll dominates.

However, in emphasising this stylistic aspect, the band have missed out on the second part of the process. With the elimination of Latin, Pop, Melodic influences the immediacy of the first edition has all but gone. Of the new material only "I'm a Texan" and "Doctor Jazz" straight away distinguish themselves as did "Gutter Black", "Blue Lady", "All Around this Town", "Latin Lover". Potentially effective songs like "Disco's Dead" and "Boys from Brazil" never emerge from a sameness which masquerades as stylistic unity.

Here is where I may be being unfair. I have the nagging suspicion that *Pacifica Amour* has been sold short, that the move to specialise could easily have worked. In a country where audiences expect all bands to be all things, forging a single unified sound is a brave move. In this case the failure is less that of the band than that of production.

The proof is that songs like "Disco is Dead", "Blackpool" and "Boys from Brazil" are great fun on stage yet simply do not capture the same zest on vinyl. Brazil's voice has less cut and most importantly the interplay of the twin guitars has none of the clarity displayed on *Hello Sailor*.

Pacifica Amour was probably intended to be a tougher, more hard headed, more professional album than *Hello Sailor*. Those are good intentions and *Pacifica Amour* deserves support because it is by no means a bad record. Yet it is a pity that the cost of self determination had to be so high.

Bruce Belsham

ON SIRE THRU WEA

TALKING HEADS • RAMONES