

# Into the Irish jelly-roll man

Record review by Bruce Cookson

A long time ago, I realized that most people didn't share my rabid enthusiasm for Van Morrison. I remember trying to convince my grade ten English class that the wild Irishman was better than Black Sabbath. It was a hopeless cause. Van Morrison wasn't heavy, he couldn't sing, and his lyrics weren't relevant.

That was too many years ago. I don't know where Black Sabbath is now, but Van the Man is still around, as 'irrelevant' as ever. Probably the most idiosyncratic musician in rock, Morrison lives on in a weird and wonderful universe filled with jelly-rolls and gypsies, radios and gardens wet with rain. He doesn't swing with the times, which is just fine with me. *Into the Music* is the temperamental old dog's fourteenth release since splitting from Them, and it's all about one of his favorite themes: love, something not so irrelevant after all.

Morrison's been unusually (for him) productive of late. *Into the Music* is the third album he has released in the last three years. It follows the exhilarating *Wavelength* and the not so exhilarating *Period of Transition*, from 1978 and 1977. With a few exceptions, Morrison has assembled a new line-up of musicians. Only Herbie Armstrong on guitar and Peter Van Hooke on drums return from *Wavelength*. Gone for good are any links with the Caledonia Soul Orchestra.

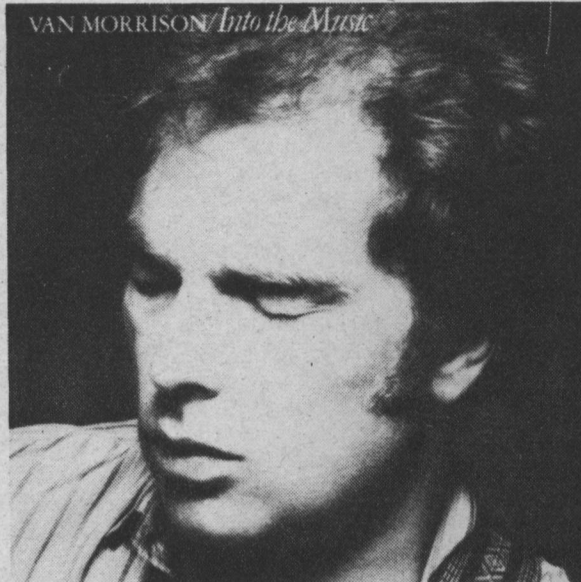
*Into the Music* is a frustrating album to review. It doesn't reveal the stunning brilliance that Morrison is capable of achieving; it doesn't fire the imagination like an *Astral Weeks* or a *Veedon Fleece*. At the same time, it isn't a tepid album. On first listening, it's not exceptionally good or bad, and yet, there is a tone of surety about *Into the Music* that raises it above the average.

None of Morrison's records sound the same. *Into the Music* is no exception. It's vastly different from the denser, guitar dominated sound of *Wavelength*. Morrison has returned to the use of strings and brass as the dominant lead and rhythmic instruments. The result is unique, though sometimes reminiscent of *Astral Weeks* and *It's Too Late to Stop Now*.

The two sides of *Into the Music* are radically different. Side one is punchier and more uptempo. The horns (trumpets and saxes) state the melodic themes, and the strings dance around them, sweetening their attack, or scrambling with them in an aural quarrel as on "Stepping Out Queen." The exceptions are "Troubador" and "Rolling Hills," quieter songs that

make use of the delightful penny whistle of Robin Williamson.

Side two is slower, quieter and more subtle. The arrangements are sparse, the horns muted and the acoustic guitar and strings more up-front. The piano is more prominent though its melodies remain simple. This side at first sounds common place, but after listening to it a few times, it begins to reveal its charms. It may, in the long run, be the stronger side on the record.



Lyrically, *Into the Music* is Morrison's most accessible record. Absent is his penchant for name-dropping, absent are the startling images and surreal stream of consciousness techniques. Gone are the dark, melancholy ballads; there's no "Listen to the Lion" on this record. Instead the songs are straight forward, joyful declarations of love:

*Baby you know what they're  
writing about  
It's a thing called love down through  
the ages.*

Most of the songs are about love between the sexes, but on "Troubadors" (where he vows to retire to

the hills so he can read his "bible still") and "Full Force Gale," Morrison makes it plain that his love is extending into the more metaphysical:

*Like a full force gale  
I was lifted up again  
I was lifted up again by the Lord*

Of course, it's sometimes difficult to take Morrison at his word. He has been quoted as saying that he often uses words just for their effects. At least with Dylan, you know for sure he's not fooling around when he puts on his fire and brimstone preacher's cloak.

One of the reasons I keep going back to Van Morrison is that his music resonates. There's an emotional commitment in his music that transcends passing trends. No other white singer can work the fields of soul and R and B and sound as genuine. No other singer sounds like him; no one makes love to, harries, butchers or caresses words the way he does. No matter how many times you've heard Morrison sing, he still surprises.

*Into the Music* shows Morrison to be up to his same old vocal tricks, but there are some exceptions. On the second side he tones things down as he adopts an almost confessional spoken style for "And the Healing Has Begun", and "Angeliou". On the former, Morrison's humor finally shines through as he sings the seduction scene in a kind of off-hand, spoken whisper. At least I hope it's supposed to be funny. The only song that is marred vocally is "Rolling Hills": at least Van could have opened his mouth for this one.

*Into the Music* is not one of Van Morrison's best records. And yet, there is something about the album that will probably pull me back to it long after I've stopped listening to many of the New Wave groups. I think it's one of those albums whose strengths surface as time goes by. Joy, at any rate, is addictive and on *Into the Music*, Morrison dishes it out by the barrel. If you like Van Morrison, get the album, if you don't, why not give it a try.

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