

Wrack 'n Roll

by Alex Party

Another column to do and not a thing to write on. There has been precious little good music filtering into Fredericton through our record stores, so little that I haven't bought a record in two weeks. Anyone who knows me will point out that this situation is somewhat akin to that of a junkie who has gone two weeks without a fix. I don't have withdrawal pains, but I am totally bored.

Since I have no music to write on, I feel quite justified in unleashing a tirade against our local record outlets. The services, selections and prices of the local stores are outrageously poor. They have the market cornered, know it, and are quite content to let their ordering be done by musical imbeciles. My well-travelled friends assure me that there is not a city anywhere which can equal Fredericton's miserable standards in this field. Even in Saint John it's still possible to buy new albums for five dollars: the going price here runs from six to eight plus tax.

I doubt if this diatribe will have any result: as I mentioned, so long as those profits keep rolling in, the stores will smugly continue to sell the drivel that we hear on commercial radio, and little else.

At any rate, it's good to hear reports, however tentative, that some people who know and love music may be setting up a record store. It's about time the consumer got a break.

And now for the musical part of today's show, we're featuring John Lennon and Lou Reed. The Lennon album was sent to CHSR by Capital records; the Reed record was brought down from Montreal by a friend. Both should hit the Fredericton record stores in two or three weeks.

John's new issue, WALLS AND BRIDGES, is his best since the first Plastic Ono Band set. Lennon sounds alive, and seems to be enjoying his music more than at any time since the demise of the Beatles. John's dropped his political sermonizing, which was always painfully naive, and he's returned to writing good lyrics and melodies. Like McCartney's BAND ON THE RUN, this record seems to be a move towards the re-use of the techniques of the Beatles. Unfortunately, some of WALLS AND BRIDGES is not particularly memorable. After seven or eight playings, there are still songs which haven't lodged themselves in my memory. Perhaps this results from the subtlety of much of the music; the rockers are the more immediately ingratiating cuts. John Lennon is, of course, one of the classic rock 'n' roll singers. The record seems to be one which must be played often to be appreciated fully, but songs like "Whatever Gets You Thru The Night" will insure a degree of fast satisfaction. Hopefully WALLS AND BRIDGES marks the return of John Lennon as a major musical force.

Lou Reed's new LP, SALLY CAN'T DANCE, is his most commercial effort to date. I confess that I've only heard it once, so this isn't the most authoritative review around. From my brief audition, I'd have to say that I'm disappointed. Rock fans should find it as entertaining as ROCK AND ROLL ANIMAL, but Reed's fatal weakness of uneven material is still present. Some of the songs on the new record are great; some are just embarrassing. I suppose that's a consequence of baring your closets to public scrutiny. I really believe that Reed should do another comedy record: TRANSFORMER is still his best effort.

Enough, for now, next week I'll look at some intelligent country music.

Two Canadian books reviewed:

A welcome harvest

The Pole-Vaulter
by Irving Layton
McClelland and Stewart,
94 pages, \$3.95

Fire on Stone
by Ralph Gustafson
McClelland and Stewart,
90 pages, \$3.95

By CLARE MACCULLOCH

It is unfortunate that McClelland and Stewart chose to release these two books at the same time. They tend to be treated as a pair and as such, have turned up as otherwise unlikely bedfellows in many of the reviews which should perhaps be dealing separately and in depth with each.

There are some obvious parallels, though, to be drawn. Gustafson (b. 1909) and (b. 1912) have both had outstanding creative careers which span the same time, movements and trends of poetry in this country. Both have been subjected to the same influences of their fellows and country and both have chosen many of the same themes. Their real difference is in form. They are both still very active (while many of their colleagues have either fallen or lag sorely in their shadows). They both still speak to us from "an inner and charmed circle" which has contributed in some respects to most of what is written today.

Layton is by far the more familiar. In *The Pole-Vaulter*, his latest book, (an almost expected annual event in poetry circles), he gives us a collection of his work and a record of where he has been since *Lovers and Lesser Men* (1973). This new book begins with a visit to Anne Frank's House in Amsterdam, a little over a year ago. It was there that the poet found his theme and indeed one of the central metaphors of the book. "Anne Frank, with her imagination and courage is the prototype of all pole-vaulters," the poet muses. He goes on to assert that "the world is redeemed by its pole-vaulters." This collection, then, is an attempt to register for us the sprint that made up Layton's past year.

All of the usual observations, insights, curses and jibes (as one reviewer has itemized them) are there to be sure: cities examined, old shadows given names, new masks ripped off, an epigram and a requiem for A. M. Klein, a tribute to Harry Truman, "Lines for My Grandchildren", "Honeymoon" poems, love poems, sexual acrobatics poems, lines "For a

Young Poet Who Hanged Himself" and several more.

Surely the range reminds one that Yeats was perhaps not the "last Romantic". In any case, there are seventy-seven poems in all and the range and subject matter includes some fine treats for everyone.

Pervading throughout is a sense of joy, a rare commodity in these days of anti-intellectualism and cynicism. The joy is a tragic joy certainly, tragic in every sense that Yeats meant the phrase. Layton, the man, is unafraid of himself; he seems to see so much, including his own role in the whole futile scheme of things. Truly he has been given the gift of laughter (tragic and comedic) and he seems to sense that the world is mad.

He sums up his own position.

"In any event, that is how I see my vocation: to dream and to interpret dreams like my forbear Joseph and to spray from time to time the civet of poetry between the reeking aisles where people in civilized dress sit daydreaming of murder, violence and destruction, a smile of pleased gratification on their lips. Though I am often appalled by the joylessness and the illiteracy of the heart which I see spreading everywhere with frightening rapidity—if it continues it will kill off poetry just as surely as Macbeth murdered sleep—I shall continue to write poems for as long as inspiration lasts, though no longer, heaven or honesty forbid. For the good of my soul if for no one else's—and because I need the exercise."

Gustafson is less inspiring for the spirit. His attractiveness is not so immediate, so passionate, nor as exciting perhaps but it is in the long run more profound. He wears his scars under his doublet and his colours are less dramatic and appealing. In short, it hurts more to read him but he is worth the time and effort. It is a mark of the time, that such a lot of persuasion must go before many will swallow a beneficial poetic pill. It is unfortunate that so many of the younger poets do not seem to be paying their dues to Gustafson for he has much to show us.

He is a superb craftsman; his poems sit like diamonds on black velvet, every bit as precious and faceted when held to the light.

Gustafson, too, writes of many of Layton's themes: travels, common events and metaphors like "Corollary of a Non-Sneeze" and "The Mosquito", love and death and being a Canadian poet. He moves from the simple to the complex, spinning a fascinating metaphys-

ical web as he goes. In "Sogged Verses" he observes:

All fish look sad;
Some look funny;
But mostly clownish
Aptions are far from them;
They hang on sinkable
Liquid not moving a muscle,
Their mouths in a droop feeling
Terrible for themselves
Like Canadian poets,
Their big jelly eyes
Deep with adulatory dreams,
The little fins transparent
Beside the gulping gills. Some
Are pretty slick though.

This poem is perhaps not the best example of how he develops his conceits but brevity of space dictates. Perhaps this will whet the appetite for a look at some of the longer ones in *Fire On Stone*.

In many of the poems, as Alan Pearson has already noted, the vocabulary can be a hurdle. The poet writes: Asclepius, acronychal, arachnocampa Luminosa, spinifex, mihrab and Akhnaton. Some of the titles are as unique: "The Business of Staggering Deaths," "The Metaphysics of the Glow-Worm Grotto," and "O Mud, Thou Vile Sublime".

The sense of joy is here but it is less in the blood and more in the cranium. Gustafson's work is rarified sometimes beyond comfortable normal breathing. If you like Wallace Stevens and the later Pound, Gustafson is worth getting to know. His poetry is refined, clever, cerebral, and ultimately intellectual, of the first water. He commands respect in the same way that A.J.M. Smith, James Reaney and John Glassco do.

If inspiration seems more spontaneous and passionate than this appears, and not worth all this intensity and contemplation perhaps we should remember the American poet John Crowe Ransom, who years ago published the only poems he considered worth preserving: forty poems in a slim volume out of twenty five years of poetic activity.

"The rudiment of criticism" wrote T.S. Eliot, "is the ability to choose a good poem and reject a bad poem; and its most severe test is of its ability to select a good new poem, to respond properly to a new situation." Both Layton and Gustafson have such poems in their latest collections. Here are two mature Canadian craftsmen reaching out to us, inviting us to share their visions. If we are truly interested in the poetry of this country, dare we refuse?

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stories, graphics or whatever.

★ So send 'em in! ★