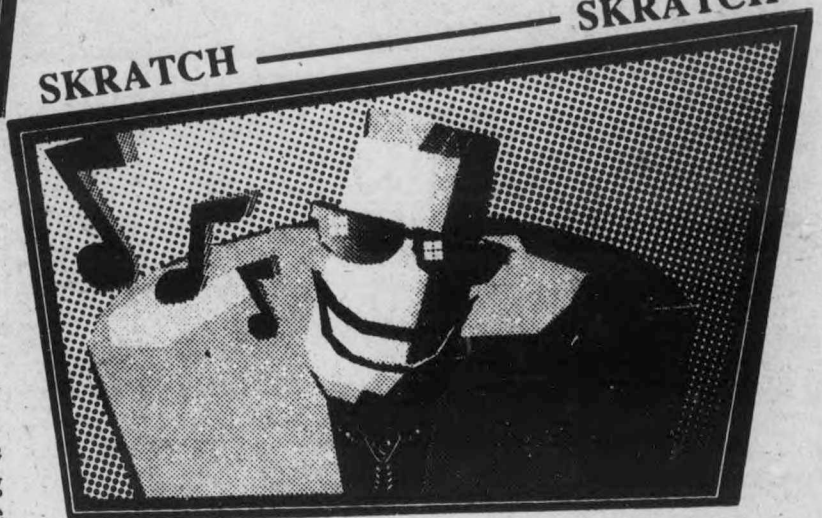


MEAT

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BOB DYLAN Oh Mercy (MCA Records)

Before and in between parts of his summer tour, Bob Dylan spent some time in New Orleans with producer Daniel Lanois (U2, Peter Gabriel, Robbie Robertson) putting together an album, featuring such noticeable back-up musicians as Cyril Neville and the Neville Brothers' percussion section, Rockin' Dopsie, and Mason Rufner. Rumours anticipated another Dylan masterpiece.

As well, Dylan's summer tour, which I was lucky enough to take in at Old Orchard helped to increase excitement. He delivered his most powerful vocals in a couple of years, along with a slashing and fire-spewing set of mostly oldies that surprised a lot of people.

Oh Mercy takes the improved voice and pairs it with some amazingly quiet music, which hasn't occurred since *Infidels*. There are many saying that this is Dylan's finest since *Blood On the Tracks* (1974); but, I must go even further and say that this album is his best since *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965). What makes this so successful is the fusion of the several Dylan approaches to music and writing in the last ten years.

The album kicks in right away with the opening out "Political World", a survey of why Dylan switched his focus to the spiritual side of life in 1979. His observations are a collage of different situations, though the first lines set the tone and pursuit for the next nine songs: "We live in a political world/Love don't have any place". The music propels the songs much like the *Shot of Love* sessions in 1981. Only one other song manages to pick up such a "wild" beat, that being "Everything is Broken", written in a style recalling such classics as "Subterranean Homesick Blues" paralleling the opening song.

"Where Teardrops Fall", the second song, sets the musical

pace with a combination of country sounds (via Lanois' dobro) and a nice r'n'b beat circa.1952-3. The song sets up Dylan's love: "We banged the drums slowly/and played the fifes lowly/ You know the song in my heart", though it leaves some speculation concerning the identity with such ominous lines as "far away in the stormy night/far away and over the wall/ you are there in the flickering light/where teardrops fall". Perhaps this is the same love Bob asked us about in "Tight Connection to My Heart" (1985).

Both "Ring the Bells", and "Disease of Conceit" are lessons that have followed the traditions begun in '79's *Slow Train Coming* and continued through *Shot of Love* (81), *Infidels*(83), and *Empire Burlesque* (85). Dylan's message is simple: do what is going to maximize the good, and create the most love.

The middle songs, "Man in the Long Black Coat" and "Most of the Time", are the strongest on the album. The former is sung in a haunting, whisper-like voice, that is accompanied by similar music. It is the story of a stranger who appears in a town and then disappears with one of the local girls. It brings reminiscences of both the prophetically eerie lead character in *Pale Rider*, (starring Clint Eastwood) and the masterful lyrics of "Knocking on Heavens Door" (1973), combined with the morality that Dylan has been singing about throughout the Decade.

"Most of the time" is Dylan's most personal song on the album, reminding me of the songs he was writing in 1974. Some have accused Dylan of being aloof and too much of a "rock star" in the last few years (notable Joan "give me a newsworthy cause" Baez, and a certain writer in *Rolling Stone* magazine), but this song challenges the changes, with a

superbly written account of what it means to be human, and how hard it is to always give what is right.

What begins in "Most of the time" as an inquiry into loving others, is brought fully in the open with "What good am I?". Whether it is confronting an unjust situation, or showing mercy and compassion, he asks the question, "What good am I if I don't do what I should?"

Dylan's interaction with his listeners is also taken up again, after a couple of years absence. The last two songs, "What was it you wanted" and "Shooting Star" openly challenges the cry that has gone up over the decade concerning Dylan's visions and pursuits. "What was it you

wanted" has an excellent sequence of lyrics and harmonica playing early on, and seams angry with the complaints lobbied against his shows and records. "Shooting Star" on the other hand, is more conciliatory. Dylan seems kind of worried as he pleads with us: "it's the last temptation/the last account/ could be the last time/ you hear the 'Sermon of the Mount'".

The song sums up the album well, as he shows his hand and

his intentions in verses like those. His album is directed towards his listeners, and not just for pleasure but also for a reason, which reveals who his love is. The album is not overpowering in any way, and is a synthesis of his best efforts of the last ten years.

Scott Dunham



El Bobbo giving us ample opportunity to figure out why he's been such a hit at the beach this year

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