



Sound Tracks

by Mark Teeham

ROXY MUSIC — "Country Life (Atco). The rain runs casually down the night-vision window, distorting the normally clear harbor view and driving it all inward. No transcendence via starry skies tonite. Uptight melancholic feelings gnaw on the inside walls and there's no help on the outside. Frustrated boredom permeates the air, and the perennial void cries out to be filled. With ... anything to escape from the crushing blandness and artificiality of it all. From the reality of a depressed self. Just then the room is filled with the first sounds of some record placed desperately on a turntable. An English group called Roxy Music (what a strange name) with their 4th album titled "Country Life" (and what a tastefully revealing cover that is). Oh yes, they had that masterfully decadent LP of last year ["Stranded"] which triggers such fond memories. Avant-garde rock shot thru with European flavorings. But now guitarist Phil Manzanera deftly prepares the way for the sure-to-come main charge, delivered with mannered gusto by Paul Thompson (drums) and John Gustafson (bass). And with the first words from meister Bryan Ferry, sung in that distinctive quaver of his, salvation of a kind lies close at hand; "The sky is dark/The Wind is cold/The night is young/Before it's old and gray/We will know/The thrill of it all."

Yeah, "The Thrill Of It All" — Roxy at their indomitable best, ploughing steadily thru the turbulent seas of romantic existentialism ("When you try too much/You lose control/Pressure rises/And so I'm told/Something's got to give/Oy weh/High life ecstasy/You might as well live.") A real sizzler of an opener, on which they lay on all the trimmings. Bears a general affinity to "Streetlife" on the last album, the "Thrill" is an entirely grander affair. The amazing aspect about "Country Life" though is that Roxy is able to sustain this frenzied momentum, filtered with less variations, right thru the entire album. Truly excellent, and another plus in the continuing saga of Bryan Ferry, surely one of the most creative rock artists of the 70's. His hard work on the lyrics last fall shows, and while there might not be anything quite up to "A Song For Europe" or "Mother of Pearl" — those epics to remain etched forever in the rock heavens — the material here is consistently strong and varied in temperament. Roxy clearly remains the vehicle for Ferry's artistic adventures, and on "Country Life" it's a full plunge into the politics of romance, very successfully pulled off owing to Ferry's ability to probe a lover's psyche. As well as paint scenes and convey feelings with an economy of lyrical construction. Somehow he's always been able to take the most mundane of subjects and make something enduring, lasting out of them. Something more than the ordinary. A successful combination of style and content. Impressionistic fantasizing.

Of course the band itself makes all this possible, and thanks to the sympathetic production help of John Punter, they've never sounded better on vinyl. Organized chaos, or a collage of shifting sound, with Ferry's vocals always out front. Manzanera is developing into a top-notch guitarist, his playing demonstrating

inventiveness while still remaining functional. Also impressive is the work of Eddy Jobson on strings, synthesizer, and keyboards; even Ferry's piano styling has become a bit more sophisticated.

Aside from the thrilling moments provided by the opener on Side 1, "All I Want Is You" (released as a single but of course you'd never hear it around here) offers a study in dynamic solidity. The group's performance is very arresting as they execute crunchy melodic runs interspersed with slow passages; the hard-driving beat is nicely complemented by Manzanera's shiny riffs and Ferry's confident vocals. He sings against a background of impending rejection, "Don't want to know/About one-night-Stands/Cut price souvenirs/All I want is/The real thing/And a night that lasts/For years." That choppy construction really works. Following next, "Out Of The Blue" is manic Roxy done with finesse; Jobson's soaring synthesizer just about lifts everything right thru the speakers while Andy MacKay's oboe titillates nicely. Also effective is the Thompsoon-Gustafson rhythm unit, playing with an amazing degree of empathy. Less successful is the side's closer ("If It Takes ALL Night") an adaptable rocker with 50's roots and bluesy patches; the lyrics are full of that sardonic humor Ferry is noted for. Much more challenging is the mellow subtlety display on "Three And Nine," where El Ferraro is convincingly doubtful.

If you can stomach the initial melodrama and Teutonic interludes of "Bitter Sweet" (it actually grows on you), then Side 2 should prove a winner. The floating ruminations of "Triptych," with Jobson's keyboards in the Forefront, generate an engaging aura prior to the raunchy romanticism of "Cassanova," a chilling, fatalistic rocker that also owes much to Jobson's dexterity. "A Realy Good Time" is a tale full of true romantic observations; heart-rending confessions crossed with nostalgia, perfectly set-off with sporadic string interjections. When Ferry sings these lines with bell-ish keyboards in the distance, you can see her face waver on the pond's surface: "There's a girl/I used to know/Her face is her fortune/She's got a heart of gold/She never goes out much/But boy-when she does/Then you know ... She'll have a really good time." Click the glasses for that one. And then, in sudden contrast, the band unleash the 4-star beauty, "Prairie Rose." Silver kineticism breaking right on thru. After Manzanera's layered circular riff intro, Thompson and Gustafson hit with a hard rhythm explosion that floats upward until ...! It all drops down on a dime as Ferry whispers "Texas", and the band plunges/gallops onward in a luscious frenzy. El supremo all the way, don't stop and wait for another day. Saved.

Footnote: With reference to Clair Duff's letter — Thanks for your interest and concern, but no offense was meant to dear old Scotland. The point (If you re-read the column) was that you don't normally expect R & B outfits to originate from Scotland. The fact that the average white band is so good is a tribute to themselves... and Scotland. Peace.

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