

Labelle plays chitlin circuit

by Richard Desjardins

It's a million light years from 1960 *Doo Wop* Philadelphia to 1976 New York City transexual glitter rock, but it's a transition that Labelle seems to have made quite well.

During the height of their heyday in the early sixties, the group had a million selling single on Atlantic Records with *I Sold My Heart To The Junkman*. Known in those days as Patti LaBelle and the Bluebells their circuit consisted of the large black theatres like the *Uptown* in Philadelphia, the *Apollo* in New York, and countless sleazy nightclubs along the way. After their big record in 1962, the Bluebells had trouble recording a hit followup and were lost in the

power struggle between up-coming groups like the Shirelles, Marvellettes, Martha and the Vandellas, and later, the Supremes.

Content to play the "chitlin' circuit," the Bluebells were on the road until 1967 performing soulful versions of *Danny Boy* and *You'll Never Walk Alone*. In '67, Cindy Birdsong left the group to become one of the Supremes, leaving a void which proved difficult to fill. "Of course we were bitter," stated Patti LaBelle in a recent interview. "She left after a gig one night and we found out the next day." After trying out several possible replacements, a transvestite showed up for an audition in full drag and the Bluebells packed it in.

Nona Hendryx, Sarah Dash and Patti LaBelle moved to Bri-

tian and became heavily involved in the progressive British music scene. They did session work for Track Records which originally recorded the *Who* and Jimmy Hendrix. It was during their three year hiatus in England that Nona began to realize that they had an inner music of their own and she started writing material for the group. Out of the ruins of disillusionment, outlandish wigs, skin tight gowns, and stale arrangements of "popular" songs, resurrected Labelle with straightforward and deeply personal lyrics served up in a blend of infectious rock 'n soul.

In 1971, Labelle returned to the United States and recorded two albums, *Labelle* and *Moon Shadow* for Warner Brothers. The records, though well received by the rock press, sold poorly. However, Labelle carried on, developing a tough writing style and tightening up their harmony.

In 1973, Stevie Wonder had a hand in the production of their LP *Pressure Cookin* on RCA. A poem written by the black poet/musician Gil Scott-Herron, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* was put to music and united in a medley with Thunderclap Newman's *Something In the Air*. Seven original compositions by Nona and a Wonder tune, released as a single rounded out the album. The LP received little promotion and though it was their most commercial blending of hard rock and R & B to date, the record went unnoticed by the record buying public.

In a rather unusual venture, Labelle teamed up with Laura Nyro in 1974 to record an album of soul classics such as *You Really Got A Hold on Me*, *Jimmy Mack* and *Dancing In The Streets*. The album, *It's Gonna Take A Miracle* was a departure from Laura Nyro's previous albums of original material and did poorly sales wise. Labelle fans didn't like the idea of them singing background and everybody lost out on that venture. However, Columbia Records officials were impressed



Labelle rings out loud and clear.

enough to sign Labelle to their Epic label.

Out of left field, in the spring of 1975, their single, *Lady Marmalade (Voulez vous coucher avec moi?)* was blasted from every transistor radio, jukebox and disco around the world. This blatant sexual parody of prostitution backed with the piercing horns of the New Orleans band, the *Meters*, shot up the music charts to number one, affording Labelle the recognition which had evaded them for so long. The album followup entitled *Nightbirds* went gold as well. Songs such as *Are You Lonely*, *Somebody Somewhere* and *Don't Bring Me Down* are indicative of the strong social comments Nona makes in her songs.

Interestingly enough, earlier records by Labelle were suddenly re-issued and promoted more vigorously than the first time around.

Phoenix, their next album release failed to come up with a powerhouse followup single to their 2 million plus seller. Commenting on *Phoenix*, *Rolling Stone* stated: "... Labelle are terrible singers, raspy, abrasive, as subtle as a battleship hitting a glacier ... yet so provocatively

original and their attack so spirited that they trivialize all charges that could be brought against them." On *Phoenix*, Nona's writing was getting more sexually witty; "I'm spent, you win/ I'm going to give you up for Lent."

Their newest release, *Chameloan* marks a change in direction for the group. Though never a "disco" group in any sense of the word, their music remains highly danceable. *Gypsy Moths* is a musical trip to Latin America which may be an indication of new directions. *Get You Somebody New* features prominent horn charts and *A Man In a Trenchcoat (voodoo)* is quite spacy in a jazz sense. Sexual parody is still a strong part of Labelle's message as *Come Into My Life* and *Going Down Makes Me Shiver* attest to. However, it's songs like *Who's Watching the Watcher* that displays Labelle in their best rock 'n soul tradition.

There is no doubt that Labelle have set the standard for all future female groups. One still wonders however, in this so called "liberated" society where Labelle would be if they weren't women? Was it on *Archie Bunker* that I heard somebody who had just seen God say "...well, first off she's Black..."

CLASSIC NOTES

by James Leslie

Many eminent critics measure Johannes Brahms' stature as a composer in a manner which rivals that of Beethoven. To this end, Brahms' first symphony is often referred to as the "Tenth Symphony."

While I have no quarrel with the stature attributed to Brahms, I feel that his first symphony is not a further development of Beethoven's ninth. Perhaps it should be more properly assessed as the first successful extension of Beethoven's initial tonal directions, or the one that Beethoven could not write. The evidence for this position is found in the first movement.

The movement opens with a slow, extended introduction carried by four harmonic voices consisting of most of the orchestra. The strong chromatic character of the introduction yields to the terminal dominant chord.

The first theme is introduced by mysterious phrases of woodwind and string constructed on the diminished seventh. Modulation from piano to forte leads into the theme which is carried by the strings. The development is brief, and the first theme is ended with a return to chromatic figures in the dominant chord.

The main body of the movement is announced by clashing orchestral sections in fortissimo. The theme which follows this instrumental tangle consists of the string patterns of the previous theme accompanying the bass of the preceding chromatic passages. After strong and full development, the theme ends in a related dominant chord.

The second theme, carried by woodwinds, consists primarily of melodic phrases which fly to and fro about the orchestra. The theme gradually dies in pianissimo without any significant development.

The final movement, introduced by the violas, opens in the chord of B minor ninth, providing numerous developmental challenges which are taken up by the strings. Each

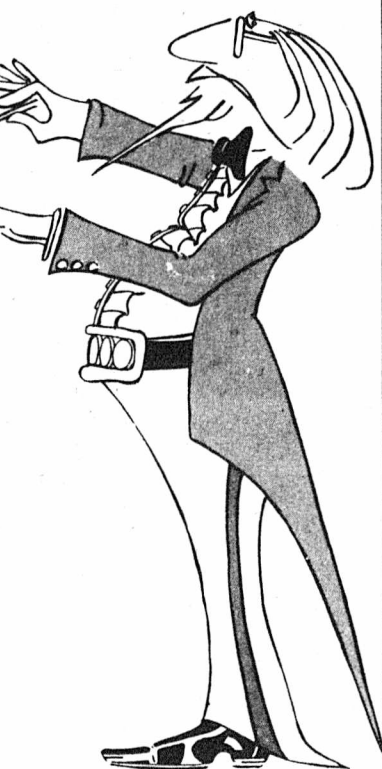


figure in the development is taken from the initial string exposition which is repeated to close the final theme.

The movement ends with a short, simple coda, giving rise to a 'dying out' ending, rather than a growing finale, in the major tonic chord (C).

Brahms had little regard for traditional tonality, expanding tonality to more complex levels than formulated by Beethoven in his earlier works. In Brahms' first symphony, he successfully stepped beyond previous boundaries to instill his own concepts into the post-Beethoven symphony.

The presence of transitional cadences in the form of chromatic figures between themes serves to bind the symphony together in a more fluid manner than Beethoven initially achieved with Motzartian cadences.

Brahms successfully used modulation in a manner and style only attempted by Beethoven in his earlier works. Brahms' use of modulation was more complete and complex than that of his predecessor.

An appreciation of Brahms' genius can be gleaned from the wide initial acceptance of his symphony. His innovative powers succeeded in altering tonal tradition in a constructive and beneficial manner. In short, Brahms succeeded where Beethoven failed.

Give to the Colin Ross fund

Wayne Kondro

Northern Studies, by Colin Ross (Borealis Press, 1975) \$6.95

Colin Ross, in seeking the distinctly Canadian, went to the North and found much that is good. He found that sense of deep-rooted communion with nature we have heard of. He describes it as being a perception "in connection with the outer world that is rooted in the solar plexus." In this process of discovery he decides ours is a material mechanistic world that concerns itself little with spiritual and organic well-being.

Having established this, at times deeply personal and highly perceptive premise, he claims that this consciousness has been lost by the Indian and Eskimo (although some have retained it) and that it remains largely up to the white man to attempt to regain it. He said the modern Indian has become immersed in the politics of civilization and lost this deep rooted perception. He implies that the claims for land and native rights by these people are but irresponsible opportunism which we Canadians have for centuries been attentive to because of our neuroses.

We are told that Indian and Eskimo proposals (and Canadian acceptance of them) such as those of the Denes will kill the Eskimo race. This altruism is lost when he proposes that we stop wasting our money so foolishly and spend a smaller portion in a manner which will relieve our guilt and reap a more profitable return. He suggests we fund such men as himself who will discover the true north, with the help of those natives who have not forgotten the past, and report back to us annually.

I would suggest that what Mr. Ross calls neuroses and guilt might also be pragmatic intelligence. Our forefathers made a business deal with the Indians. In return for large areas of land we promised reservation land and various social services. We have profited enormously from the deal and reneged on our promises. Both sides have been guilty of ignorance, apathy, greed and mismanagement. It is time both sides awoke so that some of the old consciousness might be retained and the cultural survival of these people be insured. Suggestions such as Mr. Ross' that Indian and Eskimo

claims be violently suppressed must by all means be avoided.

If we were to throw our neuroses and our rationale out the window we would be left-shame-faced with a few Indians lying dead in the ditches, seething pockets of poverty and discontent, many more disillusioned people and Colin Ross' annual report from the north. The opportunity will have been lost for both sides to establish their credibility.

The Dene proposals as we know them are an ambiguity of land claims and treaty rights hidden behind reports of squabbling native groups. Should these groups unite and present a concrete proposal which does not demand complete political separation from Canada we cannot deny them the basic right of control over their own lives. If they do so and providing there is progress, we should give them what time and aid they need. If they fail to establish economic and cultural programs that ensure their survival we may then discuss alternatives. But it would be foolish to deny them the opportunity for success.