

# Contemporary nostalgia

by Doug Wavrock  
**Bette Midler-Songs for the New Depression (Atlantic-SD18155)**

Bette Midler's new album seems to capture the music and the theme of the seventies known to some as the new depression or of a situation that many argue is a mere preclusion of it. Hence **Songs for the New Depression** has been released not only as an album reflecting present-day trends in music but also as a piece of nostalgia which is identifiable with today. Although **Songs for a New Depression** moves Bette Midler away from her 1940's nostalgia theme, the whole tone of this album is still nostalgic for as much as we have a nostalgia for the '30's and its depression there is also the feeling that in twenty or thirty years from now many people will reflect back on the '70's as a period of economic depression with a feeling of nostalgia. Instead of waiting for this time to elapse we are taken on a nostalgia trip by Bette Midler to create this feeling of nostalgia as new history is being made. Sound confusing? you bet it is, but nostalgia is nostalgia no matter when it happens.

**Songs for the New Depression** is produced wholly but arranged in part by Moogy Klingman (the rest of the album was arranged by the incomparable Arif Mardin who is one of the three keyboardists in Todd Rundgren's (Grand Funk's producer) backup group, Utopia. Judging from the results of Bette Midler's latest classic I'm prone to ask the question, who was Barry Manilow? (Manilow was her former producer and arranger but the rise of his own musical career left him too little time to devote to Bette's career.) If you are familiar with **The Divine Miss M** and **Bette Midler** and was impressed and excited with her voice, style and backup arrangements, then this album will leave you ecstatic. The album is devoted more to Bette Midler as a singer and performer than to Bette Midler as an embodiment or the personification of a bygone era that was contented and predictable. **Songs for the New Depression** features Bette Midler as she has never been portrayed before in a wide variety of characters that tell their story in the songs; i.e. a shy innocent girl, a pouting introvert or as an exuberant soul songstress.

Material wise, the album consists of early sixties and seventies songs including a couple of pieces written by Bette Midler herself. The music is a composite of the seventies from soul, reggae and ballads to folk or country-rock pieces that are arranged in such a way that they don't resemble the usual image we do have of such a music style. There is also the inclusion of a couple of selections reminiscent in many ways of the concertina music associated with Parisian cafés (e.g. Shiver Me Timbers) as well as one number being featured 'en francais'. Also there is the addition of an older nostalgia tune, "Old Cape Cod" which features a lush Arif Mardin arrangement and Bette's voice standing out above the music with no overdubs to distract our attention from her clear and expressive vocals.

"Strangers in the Night", a Frank Sinatra classic, gets a '70's facelift by Bette who features it as a bouncy soul-style number with a more speeded-up lyric package while Phoebe Snow's, "I Don't want the Night to End" becomes a slow, languorous soul ballad, which features the arranging abilities of Moogy Klingman and the talents of

the majority of the members from Rundgren's group, Utopia. Bette's own two compositions: "Mr. Rockefeller", features a contrast between the security of wealth and the insecurity of the poor who are the real victims of the 'new depression' (all of this being placed in the setting of an animated phone call to the wealthy gent which never reaches him) and "Samedi et Vendredi" features Sivuca on the accordion and his efforts help create a song that closely approaches Bette's past style of '40's nostalgia (complete with the multitudinous background vocal dubs and varied percussion). The real surprise of the album is the Dylan tune "Buckets of Rain", featuring Bette and Bob Dylan who both share the vocal responsibilities and in spite of what some people might think they harmonize well with each other as a duo. "No Jesting" is a

reggae number employing synthesizers that recreate some of the effects of steel drums while "Tragedy" is done in the style of the 1960's evangelical style of gospel music. The selection features choir, string and piano backing for Bette's voice. "Marahuana", deals with the new escape mechanism of the 1960's and '70's (although it was a relatively hot item before this time) that allows many to escape from the bitter realities of the new depression. The accompaniment here is a subtle blend of Spanish tango and traditional Mexican folk music with Arif Mardin contributing his arrangements and voice to the eventual result of the number. Two slower numbers, "Love Says It's Waiting" and "Let Me Just Follow Behind" round out the album and give us the opportunity to listen to Bette Midler, alone, without a multiplicity of background instrumentation and vocal overdubs that sometimes distract us from what Bette is doing. We realize perhaps for the first time that Bette Midler is more than just a person filling our need for a nostalgia figure who can take us back to the 'good old days'; rather her **Songs of the New Depression** reveal Bette as a

talented and highly potent person who cannot be typified in one singular role. She is an artist in every true sense of the word and this latest studio session of hers, tells us just this.



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