

Records in review

I'M THE MAN - JOE JACKSON

By W.L. MEYER

About a couple of weeks ago, I heard "I'm The Man" by Joe Jackson and I just couldn't get the tune out of my head. I hummed it to myself on the bus, at class everywhere. This in itself is not unusual for me except for the fact that I just finished reading a Henry Kuttner short story dealing with catchy songs that won't go away. In Kuttner's story "Nothing but Gingerbread Left" a simple rhyme developed by the Allies in World War II distracts the German army to the utmost of inefficiency (sort of like Monty Python's "Killer Joke" skit) Kuttner's theme of there being certain tunes that are unforgettable for certain periods of time seems very applicable today (Kuttner wrote his story back in 1943)

Such is the case with the title track off Joe Jackson's new lp, "I'm The Man". Basically the song is concerned with the fact that there seems to be some sort of agency and media "plot" to promote some form of annual "trend product" for the consumer. Jackson brings us the yo yo, hula hoop, skateboards, Kung Fu etc. as examples and the while subtly telling us that if he can't sell something to grownups, he'll get through to your kids anyways. If society has the cash, then Jackson says he'll provide the trash. Of course Jackson is right and all these trends affect us in one way or another. I bet that most of us have had a yo yo or frisbee or something that was really in vogue at one time (As an aside, the four or five year cycle for yo yo use should be on the upswing next year if I'm not mistaken). Of course Joe Jackson and band have more than the above to say on the song and we get a feeling of how powerful and influential the music industry really is reading between the lines. Musically Graham Maby's choppy bass line and Gary Sanfords few but well timed guitar chords set a hurried pace, keeping the song aloft for its full four minutes. Although Jackson has been described as new wave, the song seems to put him closer to the "power pop" of Nick Lowe or the Knack than the

"new wave" of Graham Parker. As such, "I'm The Man" could do very well on the airwaves.

Going to the other extreme of Jackson's music, "On Your Radio" is very reminiscent of Elvis Costello's music. But unlike Costello's music, Joe Jackson does not seem to complicate things by over-dubs but remains relatively "thin" and simple musically. Intrusions of harmonica here and there provide some variation but throughout the lp, bass guitar drums and vocals are the only instruments used frequently. Lyrically Jackson is getting revenge upon all those who had crossed him at one time, telling them they'll only get near him by listening to him on the radio where he's a star.

"Geraldine and John" slows the side down a bit for a few caustic remarks about a happy, loving couple who are married but not to each other. On the song it seems as if the bass guitar has taken over from the lead guitar as the most pronounced instrument. On "It's Different For Girls", the guitar is relegated to a few background licks as the bass leads the drive of the song. Incidentally, the bassline of "It's Different for Girls" is very much in the Fleetwood Mac style.

"Kinda Cute" and "Get That Girl" (from side 2) are straight "power pop" tunes. Ask me to explain this label of "power pop" and I can only point to music of Nick Lowe, Dave Edmunds, the Knack etc, and the fact that it is loud, bouncy rock perfect for dancing and radio airplay. You might call it this years "trend" for music. Of "punk", "new wave" and "power pop" music it is only the latter which has the capability to wipe the airwaves clean of disco.

Old style bar room jazz music eases us into the second side with "The Band Wore Blue Shirts". Although the song begins gently it soon ends as guitar chords come crashing down in rapid succession. This leads us to yet another song about a bands need for an audience and more importantly as Jackson admits, the cash. Once again the band provides a bouncy and uncluttered musical style. Maby's bass line is so choppy and lead-like he must have taken lessons from Yes bassist Chris Squire.

"Don't Wanna Be Like That" expounds the all too familiar theme about seeing America and not wanting to fall prey to its big city glitter that'll "scramble your brains". Sanford's flashy guitar work makes a more noticeable mark here as its chords are louder and more sustained. Venomous lyrics make this otherwise perfect pop tune unsuitable for most AM airwaves.

From the low of "Amateur Hour" we are raised to the high of "Get That Girl" a powerful pop tune with a bounce and rhyme coupled with a driving bass that never lets up. Drummer Dave Houghton really puts the sticks to his skins on this one. "Friday" ends what seems to be an exceptionally short (timewise) lp. Since the songs are so fast paced and catchy, one doesn't realize that they have gone through about 35 minutes to get to "Friday". Time seems to rip through life's fabric when you're enjoying yourself. "Friday" is about just what the name implies to most of us, a paycheck, end of classes and a week end ahead of us that looks like its a week long in itself. Friday simply allows us to calm down and sigh that another week is over. Unfortunately we always wish we had that week back in the future. Jackson's song about an ageing flower child gives us a similar impression although the music is a bit too intense for my impression of a Friday. Jackson's music in "Friday" gives us no release of tension and goes to the records end with its high energy and speeding bass line.

As much as I like Joe Jackson's new lp, I can't help but put him up to compare with Graham Parker and Elvis Costello for vocal similarities and lyrical quality. Jackson's lyrics are easier and lighter for us to understand than the more British oriented Parker or Costello and with this fact, he'll probably do well in the North American market. Musically Jackson is a bit thin and repetitive but nothing really bad or of poor quality. Easily several songs off "I'm the Man" are as good as Nick Lowe's "Cruel to Be Kind" or the Knacks "My Sharona" and Joe Jackson has his own unique insights about life to his advantage. With such a myriad of new "pop" bands coming out, Jackson will need to hone those insights to even greater awareness to stay on top. Unlike Kuttner's imaginary rhyme, Jackson's music will be eventually forgotten as it is replaced by other catchy tunes in the stream of pop music. But for now, "I'm the Man" is a pleasant cross of good lyrics, "new wave" and "pop" music perfect for the followers of Elvis Costello to Nick Lowe. Thus Joe Jackson et al have become this years trend.

THE CREAKY STAIRS (to Heaven)

When the courteous moon has climbed
when the dangling buzzard has prayed
when the river has shivered like
an exorcist in a featherbed, then
you and I, my love,
you and I together
we'll climb the creaky stairs
in hopes to meet the good Lord there.

There were three crosses on a hill,
the sky went dark at three o'clock.
And death will be the song forever
unless we roll the heavy rock.
O you and I, my love
you and I together
let's climb the creaky stairs
in hopes to meet the good Lord there.

Across this dirty liberal town
a fierce light keeps on pouring down.
Through our towers try to rise
just one stairway cracks the sky
wide open, so the buzzards lose
their hunger to the glorious view.
They screech aloud in brilliant light,
and nevermore do they ache inside.

Everyone will leave their bones
crowded in the stupid ground;
and in the final silence, we will
visit that same misty shroud -
but what I'm saying, lady, maybe,
it's possible and not too crazy
let us go, right now, right now
and climb the creaky stairs somehow.

Across this ugly busstop town
a fierce light keeps on pouring down.
The passengers arrive in time
to the dead end of the human mind.
We need a guest for something better,
a little faith of modest measure,
a safecracker's magic, a white shark's nerves,
a destiny that never swerves.

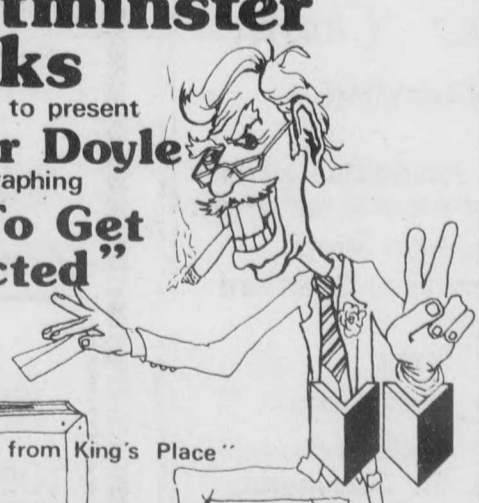
The world is sick with uncertainty,
but if there's a lock, then there's a key.
If we have ears to hear, let's hear.
All we need's one tough short prayer.
Then you and I, my love,
you and I together,
let's climb the creaky stairs
in hopes to meet the good Lord there.

Andrew Bartlett
Played at
Red 'n' Black Revue,
November 1979

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