

At last - Jonathan Edwards' album! !

Reviewed by Allen Stairs

The first thing that occurred to me when I thought about Jonathan Edwards' Album was that I was going to have a hard time being objective. Like most people I went to the two concerts and both times thought he was the best act on the bill. And second time I was part of one of those other acts. The reason that I liked him was the part that kept giving me trouble. Because it seemed that Edwards made everybody feel so good.

That's not to say that I have any objections to making people feel good. But when you're trying to be making some kind of critical judgement at the same time, it creates problems. I brought the album home, and when I played it, I found that it made me feel good too. Everytime. And I wasn't sure if it was the album, or the hangover from the concert, or some kind of mixture of both. I still had my problem, and it was worse. I still felt good, and I was even less sure why.

The reason that this good feeling is a problem is that our bodies aren't very bright. We're all the time doing things like going to horrible movies and crying in our coat sleeves, or, with movies like "Gone with the Wind," leaving the theatre glowing like a morning rose. And its the same thing with books and paintings and music. Paint a picture of a little girl with pigtails, rosy cheeks and big blue eyes saying her prayers and the whole world sighs. Or write a book about a 24 year old girl who died and everybody cries. Its not that there is anything wrong with little girls saying their prayers, or that there isn't something tragic about 24 year-old girls dying. But there is something dishonest about using these gimmicks (that's what they become, unfortunately) to get our money. As someone said, they're like buttons that the "artist" can push, and we react like emotional marionettes. The world's a stage in more ways than one.

Don't get me wrong. I don't think that Jonathan Edwards is dishonest. (I'm not sure about Erich Segal), either. I read that he cried twice writing Love Story. What I did have trouble deciding was whether Jonathan Edwards is genuinely creative or merely someone with a knack for getting us to respond emotionally.

With all of that in mind, I'm going to take a look at the album itself, and tell what I think I did find.

The album opens with the same number that opened both concerts "Everybody knows Her." The main virtue of this number is the strong, bouncing rhythm that is kept up throughout. Stuart Schulman's bass playing has a lot to do with this. He plays with just the right amount of staccatto, and the two syncopated rhythms of Edwards' guitar and Schulman's bass balance each other nicely. And when Edwards adds the scat syllables in the bars following the second chorus, the rhythmic effect is a delight.

"Cold Snow" opens weakly, I think. The violin has nothing interesting to say, and what it comes out with would have been better left unsaid. The song does not come off well overall. This is largely due to the peculiar structural device Edwards has chosen to use. One phrase is run into the next by ending a line in the middle of a bar which forms a rhythmic unit by itself. The verbal line is carried into the following one by completing the rhythmic unit and adding a chord change. An interesting device, but it doesn't work here. The rhythm comes out as a jerk rather than a smooth link, and our ears are annoyed.

"Athens County" is good bluegrass. The banjo works well here, and provides a nice counterpoint to Edwards' harp. Edwards plays a much more toneful style of harmonica than most of the people using the instrument today, and his melodies are interesting. This is one of his fine points. It is considerably more difficult to play the harp melodically than to simply take advantage of the fact that it is capable of making weird noises.

In "Dusty Morning" Edwards moves out to his familiar element, the number is a pseudo-baroque thing with near phrases at four bars each, and a chord progression which apparently



is supposed to show us that Jonathon Edwards can use chords that don't fall in the particular key that he is playing in. The trouble is that the oddball chords sound too calculated. The lyrics are an interesting mixture of cliches, awkward phrases, and surprisingly creative images. Basically they lack unity. We get lines like:

Kiss the golden leaves that you found in the sea
And brush them from my eyes and make a window for me.

And then a chorus like:

So will you stay with me tonight
And tomorrow we'll have another day to spend.

A mixture of fancy and old fashioned banality.

But if numbers like "Dusty Morning" fail to come off lyrically, a number like "Emma" makes up for the lack. The really interesting thing about this song is that none of the individual lines or images are particularly original. But due to the structure, the total picture is a unity. The first verse:

The first time I saw Emma
She was above me in a dream
And she throw'd her arms around me
And off we flew it seems
Like an airplane moving up and down.
Through the country town
Passing o'er the city so slow.

The next verse pictures the same thing happening every night, unvaryingly. Then comes a B section, and we discover why the singer sings. Something is wrong. Emma is late on this night, and the finger is growing restless. The last verse brings the picture into focus.

The last time I saw Emma
She made me love her 'till I died.
And we walked through clouds
together
Searching open skies
For an airplane, moving up and down.
Through the country town
Passing o'er the city so slow.

The song is a portrait of a man and woman who have killed love, and although the singer knows the reason, he can't bring himself to face it, but prefers to go over and over the events, basking in his own sorrow.

Side one ends with "Shanty", that hippy song about the chap who is going to "lay around the shanty and put a good buzz on everyday if I help it." The song has the non-virtue of making a direct appeal to the soft spot in the heart of all of us groovy people. This is the main reason that it came off so well in concert. The chord progression is the old modified blues line of songs like "Sportin' Life", B.B. King's "Understand," and a million others. For some reason the number has been slowed down for the al-

bum, and this takes away a lot of the life that Edwards gave it in concert.

Side two opens with "Sunshine". This song also is pointed at a delicate nerve.

Some man's gone
He's tried to run my life
He don't know what he's askin.

Lyrical nothing noteworthy happens. But the melody has a hidden interest. The verses are built completely from a pentatonic scale (what you get if you stick to the black keys on a piano) and this, combined with Edwards' effective use of instrumental pauses in the chorus (something he is particularly good at) salvages what could have been a notably poor.

"The King" Edwards described as his super dooper psychedelic number. Again, we move out of the country folk vein into something more involved harmonically. Here the effect is exciting. Instead of using an ordinary verse/chorus form, Edwards has written a continuously unfolding melody which spreads itself over the entirety of the vocal part of the song, building itself to a very effective climax. Unfortunately, the vocal section is short, and in order to make the song a suitable length a long, often boring, piano solo has been added at the end. This takes away from the effect of the well-engineered build-up.

"Don't Cry Blue" is by one M. McKinney. This is one of my favourite numbers. It is country western in the best sense of that term. The theme is almost archetypal;

"I've got to go the distance 'till I know I've seen a change
I've got to know the feel of every mile."

But it comes off honestly and simply. Edwards' harmonica is great, too.

"Jesse" is about the communication gap.

But in spite of the awesome possibility to slip into cliché here, Edwards manages the theme very well. Jesse is getting old, and this is played off against pictures of children.

Children sing with fantasy words
Playing little backyard games
Jesse sings to them without words
And they love her until she complains.

But its not really just Jesse's fault.

Children try to talk together
They simply cannot catch the phrase
Sometimes laughter is some how murder...

The lyrics are set against a delicately arranged melody. Altogether a fine number.

"Sometimes" is another McKinney number. This time in the tradition of Lightfoot's "She was Something Very Special to Me," a meditation on a lover who will never return. This number, like "Shanty" aims for the soft spot in our hearts. It's pretty, but pretty isn't enough.

"Train of Glory" is shit hot! Lots and lots of fun. Edwards provides us with a virtuoso demonstration of his ability to play clean, creative, and sensible harmonica lines. The tune draws heavily on all the old gospel songs about trains of glory, but this song is 100 per cent secular. The chorus is full of interesting harmonic devices. A great ending number.

Edwards, like Flatt and Scruggs, is able to work well within traditional, simple forms. And by his second or third album, should be doing some interesting things in the realm of the not-so-simple. "The King" and particularly "Jesse" are indicators of this.

But to get back to the point I wanted to make in the monosyllabic rambling that opened this review, Edwards succeeds in making us feel good most of the time. Occasionally this is because he uses the stock devices, but more often, its because something genuinely interesting is going on in the music, and because Edwards himself knows how to deliver a song properly, and comes across honestly. His talent isn't of the order of some one like James Taylor or Canada's Bruce Cockburn, but he knows what a good tune is, and this is something that even Taylor and Cockburn forget occasionally, I'm looking forward to Album number 2.