

## Strawbs find new path

The Strawbs-Nomadness [A&M-SP4544] Pundits say that a lot of things can happen to a group in the space of only ten months between studio sessions to produce a new album. But when this particular statement is mentioned in the same breath with the Strawbs, it is more than true. Since Sept. '74 when the Strawbs finished recording their eighth album *Ghosts* a lot of changes have indeed occurred among the Strawbs not only in the matter of personal changes but more so in the musical composition of their latest release *Nomadness*. The Strawbs are particularly noted for their personnel changes, so much so that many refer to their past members as the 'Strawbs Alumni Club' made up of more than a dozen musicians including the likes of Rick Wakeman, Rick Hudson, John Ford and Blue Weaver (now with the Bee Gees). The album *Nomadness* sees the Strawbs without the services of keyboardist John Hawken (once with Renaissance) and his absence can truly be heard on this album, mainly due to the fact that the Strawbs have had to engage the services of a keyboard player (John Mealing) as well as inviting Tommy Eyre and Rick Wakeman to the studio sessions to help put the music on album. In the course of listening to *Nomadness* several times as well as to *Ghosts* and *Hero and Heroine* the two albums in which John Hawken controlled the keyboards it is obvious that the Strawbs have had to make major changes in the musical approach of *Nomadness* significantly altering the almost sort of 'set style' that was so obvious in the earlier two albums.

Thus, the Strawbs have moved from a classical-electric-rock music background so obvious on such 7 minute selections as "Ghosts", "The Life Auction" and "Autumn" towards an album of shorter more abbreviated cuts all in the 4½ minute range. This had to be done partly through necessity with the departure of John Hawken but then too the album also contains a couple of very weak selections, namely "A Mind of My Own" and "Tokyo Rosie". With respect to these selections, and a couple of others as well, it almost appears that they had been reworked from the original scores which would have featured the playing of John Hawken. In other words, they were composed when Hawkins was probably still with the group and when he left, they were salvaged by Cousins and rewritten to reduce the emphasis previously placed on the keyboards.

Coupled with all the changes mentioned so far, there is in addition to the personnel problems a definite American influence coming through in their music. This may be partly due to the recent series of tours the Strawbs conducted through the States in an attempt to make themselves known to the largest music market in the world. It's bound to happen to any group especially when you try to corner the attention of a somewhat critical American audience. In "To Be Free" and "Little Sleepy" the American influence is evident but other than these two selections the rest of the album is relatively free of any influence other than the Strawbs awareness (many people say this awareness is Cousin's alone) of their own niche in the music industry. "Back on the Farm", a traditional English folk number is highly reminiscent of the material played by the Strawbs back in the 1966-67 period when they were termed an English folk band and appropriately called the Straw-

berry Hill Boys.

*Nomadness* features a wider variety of acoustic-based pieces than were normally available on more recent albums and for some musical purists this will be a welcome departure for them. "Golden Salamander" and "So Shall Our Love Die" are two fine acoustic-based selections. "A Mind of My Own" is a rather curious admixture of acoustic guitar built on a bed of a percussion-bass-synthesizer rhythm section indicating the transition that the Strawbs are going through. Still the mood and purpose behind the whole selection comes off quite well. "Hanging In the Gallery", similar to "Lemon Pie" and "Grace Darling" (from the *Ghost* session), gives us another fine example of Cousin's imagery in pondering whether people admire the art of an artist because of its beauty; or if in fact they admire the vision the artist had in trying to discard the unessentials reveal only the perfect truth that escapes most people who look at things around them.

When it's all taken into consideration, *Nomadness* is a significant new musical path for the Strawbs to advance along, similar in many ways as *Hero and Heroine* was when Hudson, Ford and Weaver left the Strawbs. In the very near future, before the Strawbs go back on the road, they no doubt will have to add a new keyboardist to take the place of John Hawken. It's hard to say right now who this might be, but from the great contribution played by John Mealing in this album all hands point towards him. And too, this album also features the use of keyboards and in all cases their presence is essential in creating the proper musical texture of the album, but in particular all their material of the past eight years or so. Here, a new stab is a necessity unless they want to rearrange all of their music.

**Lewis Furey-Lewis Furey [Aquarius-AQR508]** Who is Lewis Furey? Not too many people know and after you've listened to his album called *Lewis Furey* you'll probably still be in the dark about his true identity. Lewis has created a rather unique album centering around a person who realizes he is always out of love and probably sexually inadequate at the thought of it. Basically it's an album of fantasy, of a person imagining what a particular feeling and sensation would be like but never having the chance to experience it. His voice in keeping with the album is adolescent, breaking and unsure, mouthing unfamiliar words he's never had occasion to use before.

The subject is vividly amusing in the light-heartedness in which the whole album is presented. The music arranged by Lewis Furey and John Lissauer features a wide array of musical instruments from banjos to string sections and from mandolins to accordians. "Lewis Is Crazy", refers to Lewis Furey and it is perhaps most emblematic of the music on this album. "The Hustlers Tango" features orchestration highly similar to the music associated with a tango and one can almost picture the dancers sliding across the floor. "Louise" deals with a real love that has left and here we see the inclusion of a female voice 'en francais' relating her feelings in the whole affair. It is the only example in the album of what someone else thinks of our inadequate hero. Overall Lewis furey has created a highly interesting piece of material that features a wide range of material and manages to stick to a central theme via an unorthodox musical style.

## Browning brings emotion and expertise to piano

by J.L. Round

John Browning proved himself excellent fare last Saturday evening in the Rebecca Cohn. It is unfortunate that this masterful, young pianist gave only one performance, but it is even more unfortunate that the audience was only slightly larger than a half-capacity crowd. For those of us who did see him, however, the sentiment was unanimous about his excellence.

Mr. Browning's technique was sparkling and extremely fluid in every respect. He displayed his masterly ability to range from works by standard classical and romantic composers such as Mozart, a master of all music, and Chopin, the grand poet of the piano, to a contemporary work by Samuel Barber which called for a more showy, but superb, execution.

The Chopin nocturne, part of the second selection on the program, was probably the piece most enjoyed for the music alone, with its lyric beauty and grace. Mr. Browning showed an excellent sense for portraying the innate feeling in this, as well as the other pieces.

The main "show-piece" on the program was Barber's Pulitzer-Prize winning First Piano Concerto, which was written for Mr. Browning and given its world-premiere by him. This is an intense piece of music, sometimes furious, suggestive of huge breakers crashing on a rocky, barren coastline, or slowing at times to a melancholy-moonlight effect, but always underscored with a violent and tense emotion. Mr. Browning's superb skill and energy



throughout the piece sustained its energy-consuming drive and impact. I should like to have seen a piece such as this placed at the end of a performance, not the middle where its impact may lessen the effect of what follows. And, but for its relative brevity, it might have been.

In the second half of the program, consisting solely of Mussorgsky's popular "Pictures At An Exhibition", Mr. Browning continued to exhibit his excellent technical skills at the same high degree he had exhibited earlier. Here, however, one felt less of the emotional skill, the gloomy, brooding of the piece. The emotion seemed less urgent, the pulse less vital. Perhaps this was partly due to the nature of the piece, partly to its succession after the Barber concerto. But whatever the reason, it did not detract from the audience's favourable reaction which brought Mr. Browning out for two encores.

**SOUTHERN COMFORT**