

riffs

IT HAS BEEN a long time since a record came out that gives that physical need to play it over and over until it's absorbed into your bloodstream, the grooves worn into your brain with the needle of memory running it over and again in your head. But "James Taylor" (Apple SKAO 3352) has that quality. James Taylor's debut album is somehow appropriate to this breathless season of bright cold March days lying like a loose cover over soft spring. It is just the thing to listen to as you keep warm inside, expecting and sensing the unfurling green and brown balminess.

This may not be the Next Big Thing everyone talks about (maybe that one smashing sensation again in this cycle is not possible), but it is a direction to go in, and it is certain to be loved and played—perhaps more than any other record this year.

The barriers between types of music have been slowly demolished with amalgams of country, rock, jazz, classical, and blues. Now musicians have the freedom to jump around within a record or a song, and don't have to stick to the rigid form they've been cast in. It is a tribute to Taylor (and the solid support of producer Peter Asher and arranger Richard Hewson) that although this record utilizes every possible style from classical to big band to rhythm and blues, it isn't just a clever combination. It has a distinct style of its own. All that fiddling and exploring with different forms had paid off in this record which uses them all comfortably with unity of sound.

Taylor is a top folk-blues guitarist in the old finger-picking style, and the songs are essentially good contemporary folk songs. But with an emphasis on rhythm and arrangements conceptually different from anything in popular music, they transcend category. It is typical of the Beatles' work in that every song has some twist of arrangement or production that sets it apart. One song has a lead break of orchestrated eerie screams, a blues has a background of ocean-distant strings, some are irresistibly danceable.

This music is so simple and direct, and so confident in its goodness, that it is all meat and no stuffing. There is none of the superficialness that comes from trying to sell yourself. It resembles classical music in its many-leveled instrumental depth and the easy continuity created by natural links between the songs. Taylor's voice is deep and thick with the kind of on-lyric sameness that settles

over a tune, emphasizing his excellent words.

Although many of the songs were written two years ago when Taylor was at the Night Owl with a group called the Flying Machine, the changes and constructions are as advanced as anything today. It is all much heavier than it appears (float like a butterfly, sting like a bee), because Taylor is so easy to

absorb. None of the sophistications are cumbersome or merely intellectual. The appeal is really emotional and physical.

"James Taylor" is a record you'll probably be hearing a lot. It's getting so that I almost automatically get happy when I see that big green Apple label whirl around on my machine.

—Johanna Schier

