

# riffs



EVERY CULTURAL generation has its personal chanteuse who owns its collective heart whatever she does. Stereotypically, she is a lusty broad leading a hard, often tragic, life and singing her heart out about it. There are ups and downs, flops and comebacks, drugs, liquor, men, busts. The only constant is that she is cherished by her audience. Edith Piaf and Judy Garland did it for their peers, and Janis Joplin is our own magic lady. In that sense, it is a moot point to talk about whether she's singing

well or not, doing the right thing or "living up to herself." Time goes by and with it all those questions. Through everything she is herself and that is all her fans care about.

That natural Janis is captured on record for the first time with her new album, "I Got Dem Ol' Kozmic Blues Again Mama!" (Columbia KCS 9913). Producer Gabriel Mekler has managed to do two important things: he got her to relax in the studio and then got it down on tape like a live performance. Now no one will need to say, "Well, you just have to see her live" to nonlovers.

I am knocked out by this record because it has given me back Janis. There was a lot of

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skepticism about the split from Big Brother. The general feeling that she was getting too big for her britches was sent out by admirers of her original band. Lots of people seemed to hope she'd fall flat on her face, whispering that Grossman "made" her do it. Awareness of that hostility and

the total novelty of the new group made her overcompensate in their first performances. I missed the melodies and the build-up that made all that screaming mean something down my spine. Perhaps she could get the Sweet Inspirations behind her, I thought, to make up the melodic gap in her nervous, frantic improvisations.

That crisis has passed now and Janis's self-confidence seems fully regained. She was right in feeling that Big Brother was doing zilch behind her and, more importantly, blocking her growth. All growing involves some pain, but the agonies of switching musical environments have paid off. She is singing stronger and better than she ever has. The top of her range is more solid and her vocal control is maturing. One of the hazards of singing with the randomness and intensity that Janis does is the constant drain on her resources. Out of the quantity she has always squeezed out (packing enough singing for five of anyone else's sets into one of her own), it can't all be quality. But that's something she's learning about too. Most exciting of all, though, is that there are many places on the album where she breaks through into greatness by anyone's standards. She has always had the guts and energy to carry off whatever she did, but in those breakthrough places (notably "Kozmic Blues" and "Little Girl Blue") the melodic sense of her singing becomes as sturdy as the emotional one. She has a tough desire to keep growing and with that determination she could develop into one of the all-time greats along with Bessie, Billie, and other brilliants. I concur with what she says in "Work Me Lord": "The worst you can say about me is that I'm never satisfied."

One of the reasons for this

growth is the greatness of the band behind her. She learns from and is inspired by the musical partners she's interacting with. The rhythm section is fantastic, as good as any around (Brad Campbell on bass, Maury Baker and Lonnie Castille on drums). The horns are more tasteful and better integrated into the music than any white-underground group using r&b styles. They are much less conspicuous than those with Blood, Sweat, and Tears and that whole flock. They lay down something as majestic as her singing and together they all soar. On "As Good As You've Been" the band steps out with a long introductory instrumental, the horns taking a snappy solo, then the whole thing dipping to pick up Janis, just like a live entrance for "The Star of Our Show."

Unfortunately, Sam Andrews, held over from Big Brother, just doesn't cut it. His guitar playing is so out of its depth that it's a distraction. But perhaps that tenuous thread of continuity from "Cheap Thrills" will help some disgruntled listeners over the hump. The rest will just have to wince and bear it, except on "One Good Man" where the biting tone of the screaming blues solo spells out Mike Bloomfield as surely as if it were on the liner. Since this record was cut, by mutual affectionate agreement, Sam has dropped out to be replaced by John Till, formerly with Ronnie Hawkins.

Whatever flaws it may have, this is a giant of an album. Only Janis could do Rodgers and Hart's "Little Girl Blue," strings and all, as a rock tune. Only Janis could "nev-uh ev-uh" as often as she does in "To Love Somebody" and have each one indicate a different shade. And surely, only Joplin could call God "honey" as she does on "Work Me Lord": "Lord don't you leave me down here, honey."

—Johanna Schier