

## ARTS and CULTURE

## DISCUSSIONS

By Gregory Hall

Ratings: \*\*\*\* Excellent, \*\*\* Good, \*\* Average, \* Don't Bother

**Little Criminals** - Randy Newman (Warner Brothers); rating: \*\*\*\*

**Foreign Affairs** - Tom Waits (Asylum); rating: \*\*\*

**The Stranger** - Billy Joel (Columbia); rating: \*\*\*

So many self-professed "rock-poets" are no more than competent songwriters. Some are true visionaries, others jazz-age stylists and imitators of form. While some wallow in self-pity, defeat, and bored fatalism, a select few view their surroundings with all the passions and simplicity of an artist.

Randy Newman does not operate under false pretenses: he is of the latter breed. His writing is colorful while at the same time neutral, loaded with sardonic wit, cynical yet ironic, and propelled by a detached emotionalism. Varied, sometimes dissonant orchestrations provide a perfect backdrop for his expressive vocals and piano arrangements.

**Little Criminals** contains twelve slices of life, each one different, each like a distorted Rockwell-esque Americana print. Found here are a grotesquely humorous look at why short people have "no reason to live," a look at a cop through a child's eyes, life on a midwestern farm, and a sensitive portrait of a young girl at her father's funeral, among others.

Tom Waits is a stylist with a formula as vehicle to his expressions. Waits, assuming a type of persona, takes the lower-class drifter-and-drunk perspective and absorbs himself into his creation, as the object of his own searching commentary.

Waits is the fifties Greenwich Village coffeehouse poet removed from his smoky cavern, the beat poet, the bum-and-barfly, chain-smoker, and street prophet. He writes and improvises on loneliness, the tragedy of life, and the human comedy. A sparse acoustic jazz trio backing a rusty voice that can't carry a tune conjures scenes of urban blues, the decay and the drama of corner bars, and main street establishments. Songs carried by scat-singing, cool improvisations, and dark images make **Foreign Affairs**—the recorded testimony of a madman and a poet.

On the other hand, Billy Joel sings of middle-class dreams, ambitions, fantasies

and pitfalls in conventional rock idiom. Suburban comforts and discomforts, youthful restlessness, and loneliness are key subjects to Joel's limited insight. Each of his albums, least of all **The Stranger**, is handicapped by thematic sameness. It is the dynamic performance of his material that saves the album, although a clinical and calculated production by Phil Ramone almost manages to capsize this effort.

**Moonflower** - Santana (Columbia); rating: \*\*\*\*

**Moonflower** marks Santana's coming full circle from their start in 1968, through experimentation in jazz fusion, MOR, and finally back to their original roots, as heard on their last two albums. The new two-record set is guitarist Carlos Santana's rebirth; one that had been emerging slowly and was in fact long overdue.

Since band members changed constantly after the third album by the original band, Carlos' biggest challenge was in putting together a new band approximating the energy levels of the original. Missing from the transitional albums, but not quite as obvious in the last two, was what I call the "Latin Fire," seemingly sacrificed for a more laid back, sometimes more stylish approach. Thanks to the guidance of new manager Bill "Filmore" Graham, the band has redis-

covered elements and regained power missing since 1971.

**Moonflower** offers an aural wash of charged sexual Latin rock, with a modest portion of soul, samba, and inspired celebration. Carlos is among the best electric guitarists going, and those transitional years of experimentation have done nothing but add strength to his skill. However, the most credit should go to Tom Coster, keyboard player for Santana since the early seventies. On **Moonflower**, Coster finally is able to fill the gap left by the departure of original organist Greg Rolie. Coster comes of age with deep, earthy organ playing that formed the powerful backbone of the original.

**Moonflower** does have its problem, which is most often common among multiple record sets. That problem is too much material. Each of the sides stands on its own, with alternation between the studio cuts and live selections. The album is carefully balanced between the studio and live material; yet when the four sides are played consecutively, it smacks of excessiveness and over-indulgence. The problem, ironically, is that Carlos is inspired - he wants his audience to know that, but he chooses constant guitar soloing, repetition, and overstatement as proof and means. A little careful editing and more varied choice of material would have made this flaw less noticeable.

## Doc Watson: Visions In Retrospect

By Bob Buckingham  
Guest Columnist

In this column I'll attempt to deal with aspects other than the pure commercial qualities of American music. The emphasis will be on the roots or antecedents of the music and how they have been incorporated into our contemporary framework.

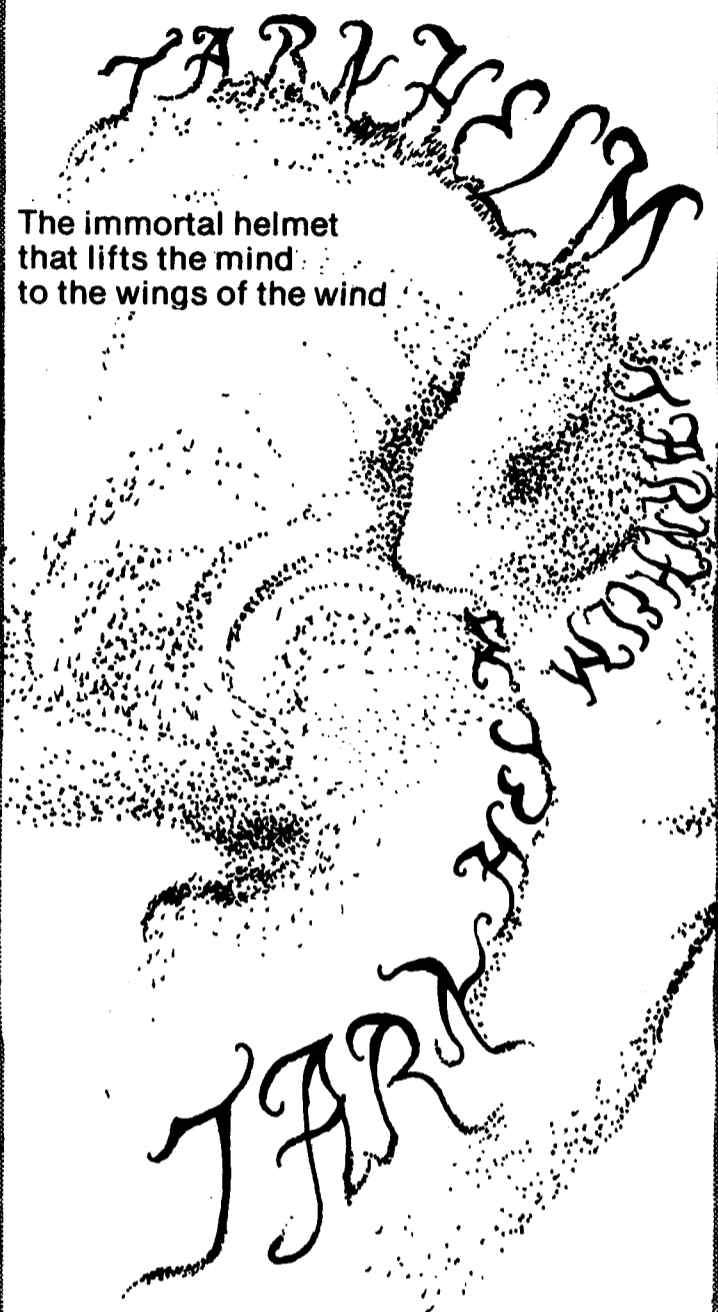
Doc Watson, a native of North Carolina, is a fine example of living music. Watson draws his material from all forms of country and folk music. He carries a strong sense of value for his music and the people he learned it from. Topic lp 12t5336, **The Watson Family Tradition**, is an English album produced by Al Lloyd and Ralph Rinzler from tapes made of the Watson family in 1964 and 1965. Herein are the antecedents of much of these songs in the past fifteen years.

When performing or recording these songs he gives credit to the source. Aunt Dooly Greer's "Roving on a Winters

Night" or gaiter Carlton's fine fiddle and banjo tunes "Georgie" or "Pretty Saro" are here, as well as lullabies, fiddle tunes and ballads not usually associated with Doc.

Doc Watson first came north as part of Clarence "Tom" Alshey's band which also includes Fred Price and Clint Howard. By 1967, Doc had at least four lp's on the vanguard label, and had played on about four more for Folkways. Two such albums were made with the Ashley band. **Old Timey Concert Vanguard VDS107/108** finds the Alshey band minus Ashley (then near 80) in concert for the Seattle Folk Society. Watson is featured on guitar, banjo, mandolin, and harmonica, while Price and Howard play fiddle and guitar respectively. Price and Howard are not professional musicians and its is apparent. Never the less, they produce some robust and hardly music which transcends any lack of proficiency. Watson turns in some fine guitar.

The immortal helmet  
that lifts the mind  
to the wings of the wind



Get Published! Be ye an artist, photographer, or writer of poetry or prose - Tarnhelm wants ye. Submit works to Humanities Office, W-161, by January 31, 1978.

drawing upon his former experience with swing and rock-a-billy. (When Rinzler met Watson, Watson was playing electric guitar with a local countryband.) On the lp here countryband.) On the lp there are some of Ashley's tunes present ("Girl From Sunny Tennessee") as well as tunes associated with Price and Howard ("East Bound Train") and Watson ("Sittin' on Top of the World").

This lp draws upon early commercial county music, and less upon the ballad and tunes of the topic lp. It wasn't until until Watson started to record for United Artist records that he began to draw from more contemporary sources with any great regularity. Of this, Watson says, "When I got back into the old time music in the sixties...I think I did too much to become a purist again, instead of being myself. Further along...actually added a few tunes that weren't really old timey along to the sets...in order to be fair to my

musical taste...but I think its Doc's spoken introduction to the Topic lp that sums up his music: To me, the old time fiddle tunes and the old time ballads, there's never been anything prettier nor ever will be.

All of Doc Watson's albums are available from: County Sales, Box 191 Floyd, Va. 24091.

Contributions  
Welcome

The scope of the arts is unlimited in its potential. You can help us realize this potential. Have you been to a movie, play, art exhibit, or concert that was so good [or bad] that you'd be inspired to write about it? Well, then write about it, and submit it to the Arts and Culture page of the Reader.