

Byrds' album lacks luster

Review by Bart Becker

Byrds. Gene Clark, Chris Hillman, David Crosby, Roger McGuinn, Michael Clarke. Asylum (SD 5058.)

It's time for "let us now half-heartedly praise famous men" again. These are the original five Byrds back together for the first time in several years and, I suppose, the obvious thing to say is that they have preserved some of the harmonies that give their songs the "Byrds" sound.

Byrds leans more toward hard rock than most of what these guys have been doing on records lately. The performance, of course, is technically superior to most, although it's often better too.

Side One opens with Gene Clark's "Full Circle" which says "Funny now the circle is a wheel/And it can steal someone who is a friend/Funny how the circle takes flight/And if it's right it brings it back again." That's followed by "Sweet Mary" which has kind of an English folksong sound to it.

"Changing Heart" is okay, but no, spectacular. They follow it with a nice treatment of Joni Mitchell's "For Free." I'm glad they did the song on this album, but it's unfortunate in a way. They can't possibly do the song better than Joni Mitchell herself and comparison is inevitable.

The side winds up with McGuinn's "Born to Rock 'n' Roll", which doesn't especially. But it does have this good line, which everybody feels sometime or another: "Sometimes you get to do the thing you're meant to, and I know I was born to rock 'n' roll."

One of the really good things about *Byrds* is that they sing a lot of "oolala" background vocals and use their voices for harmonizing breaks occasionally. But of course in the final analysis it's the total sound that makes the Byrds.

The second side opens with the hardest rocker, called "Things Will Be Better," and then moves on to a good cover of Neil Young's "Cowgirl in the Sand." The latter is essentially the same arrangement as Young's, but the Byrds' fuller vocal arrangements make it a unique song.

"Long Live the King" is David Crosby's human politics composition on the album. "The first thing that they tell you is you'll be king," it says, and "In empty space, is that the place you want to be?"

"Borrowing Time" is a bright tune full of calypso rhythms. It's a fine relief tune because of its contrast with most of the other songs. The mandolin and guitar work tries, fairly successfully, to capture the steel-band sound.

That's followed by Crosby's foreboding "Laughing," and the album ends with "(See The Sky) About To Rain." The latter has a lot of good vocal work and a surprising instrumental break in the middle, which is jarring the first time around. The second time around it sits real easy.

It may be just my perception of things, but it seems as if a lot of top-flight musicians are making essentially emotionless records these days. On *Byrds* five good musicians go through some good paces.

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