

hot
licks

Nilsson-no, Kottke-yes, Elvis, yes-maybe

Nilsson: *Sandman*, RCA.

This is a tragic waste of an enormous talent who has been wallowing in an artistic quagmire for quite some time.

Nilsson's decline began rapidly after he abandoned the Schmilsson person that served him ably through three albums—*Nilsson Schmilsson*, *Son of Schmilsson* and *A Little Touch of Schmilsson in the Night*. All the qualities that made the Schmilsson albums so engaging are gone. Instead of cleverness, we have overbearing attempts at cuteness of the pubescent lockerroom variety. Instead of dramatic flair, we have superficial gloss. Gone is his childlike innocence and good-humored playfulness.

Fortunately, Nilsson's most salable quality—his inimitable voice—still is intact. His voice, pretty without being cloy, handles romantic ballads better than anyone this side of Sinatra. He has tremendous range—both

emotionally and dynamically. He is equally at ease with the rockers as with the ballads. But the sweetest of roses cannot hide the stench of a compost heap.

"The Flying Saucer Song" is undoubtedly the most senseless thing Nilsson has yet recorded—a long, jivey conversation between two drunks and a bartender which is punctuated by banshee screams from Joe Cocker in the background.

A social register of pop stardom appears on this album: among them, Klaus Voorman, Van Dyke Parks, Leon Russell, Danny Kootch, Bobby Keyes, Ringo Starr and Joe Cocker.

Elvis Presley: *Elvis: Legendary Performer, Vol. II*, RCA.

No matter what others may claim, Elvis is *The King of rock 'n' roll*. After his first hit—"Heartbreak Hotel"—in 1956, Elvis became the symbol of rock music and teenage rebellion. Not only was he the first rock hero, he inspired later artists, from Bob Dylan to Bruce Springsteen—both had consuming life ambitions to become bigger than Elvis.

RCA Records has its own ambitions at heart. It has set out to milk more bucks from the Presley legend by issuing a series of heretofore unreleased material, primarily inferior versions of Presley standards.

The album should have little worth except for the most fanatical Presley scholar. There are muff-ups and retakes on two cuts—a testament, I suppose, that even the greatest fail. There are excerpts from a press conference and an interview when Elvis was 21.

But there are many great Presley hits here: "Blue Suede Shoes" (this is a poor, live version, by the way), "Blue Christmas", "Jailhouse Rock", "Blue Hawaii" and "How Great Thou Art."

But I still feel like someone's trying to dupe me. Even the packaging reeks of a souvenir. There is a picture enclosed, "suitable for framing," according to the album notes. There is a 14-page booklet that does nothing to broaden anyone's knowledge of Elvis, except for an interior picture of his gold Cadillac.

True students of Elvis would be better off buying the original versions of these songs. Recommended albums from the 40 that Elvis has recorded are: *Elvis* (contains early material that Presley recorded at Sun Records), *Rock 'n' Roll No. 2*, *G.I. Blues* and *Elvis's Golden Records, Vols. I, II and III*.

Leo Kottke: *Chewing Pine*, Capitol.

It only takes about two tracks to convince you—this is going to be a good album. Kottke doesn't disappoint this premonition.

Side One is proficient enough—there are two vocal tracks and the other three are instrumentals recorded with backup musicians. But it seems almost pedestrian compared to Side Two.

Here Kottke distinguishes himself. It's just he and his 12-string acoustic guitar, which he transforms into an orchestra of meshing melodic lines. Kottke uses licks from classical, country and jazz idioms and blends them with enviable ease.

He plays the lyric tunes with a poet's heart, showing a remarkable sense for phrasing and melodic nuance. And, what's even more fun, he plays with wit. "Monkey, Monkey" and "Can't Quite Put It Into Words" are infectious, driven by a rhythmic pulse that is all the more amazing because it comes only from his guitar.

Aspiring guitarist should buy this album immediately. It's the folk guitar in one of its finest hours.—

Deb Gray

Chris Squire: *Fish Out of Water*, Atlantic

Chris Squire's first solo venture never gets off the ground. But it's not because the Yes bass player doesn't use a wide variety of musical sounds.

Yes at their height (*Fragile, Close to the Edge*) were expert sound painters, and Squire, in that tradition, brings together a virtual philharmonic—everything from oboes to trumpets—to heap together a multi-textured sound. Unfortunately, the effect often verges on disaster. Separate instrumental parts are neither fresh nor crisp. They melt together into a tapioca muddle.

Yes once could turn electronic wizardry into breathtaking musical moments, but Squire cannot make his ballast rise above gimmickry.

Most of Squire's cuts follow the Yes pattern, opening first with a sound effect fade-in (which usually consists of sounds reminiscent of bells, birds or rain), followed by a long introductory instrumental section before the principal theme is introduced.

Here Squire needs lead guitarist Steve Howe, who always took the lead in establishing and developing Yes's themes. Without his presence, the music falls flat.

Then, there's the lyrics. And, granted, Yes's lyrics were pretty inaccessible sometimes. They talked of otherworldly things—usually man's relationship to nature. But coupled with their music, the effect made you feel somehow exalted; made you believe in cosmic forces greater than yourself.

Squire's lyrics are, well—too common. They deal with personal relationships—the same most songwriters write about. But his sentiments sound uncomfortable puerile in this gargantuan orchestral setting.

"You By My Side" is a straightforward love song, with a beautiful lilting line. But Squire destroys the intimate modd of the cut by bringing in his artillery of trumpets and strings, camouflaging any hint of honest emotion.

—Deb Gray



Photo courtesy of RCA records

Singer-songwriter Harry Nilsson shows the good-humored playfulness that reflected the mood of his three "Schmilsson" albums.

arts & entertainment

Wolfe offers beginning modern art with a graduate course in satire

By Bill Roberts

The Painted Word, by Tom Wolfe/ Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, \$5.95

The Painted Word, by Tom Wolfe, takes the reader into the museums and salons of Modern Art. After Wolfe's guided tour, we may think that some rooms have been conveniently skipped over, some personages introduced too glibly. But this long essay is satisfying because Wolfe once again has given us satire at its finest.

"All these years," Wolfe begins, "I had assumed that in art, if nowhere else, seeing is believing." Not so, he realizes, after reading a bit of art criticism that censures a certain painting for its lack of a "persuasive theory."

"Not 'seeing is believing,' you ninny, but 'believing is seeing,'" Wolfe says as the scales drop from his eyes. "Modern Art has become completely literary: the paintings and other works exist only to illustrate the text."

This is all quite strange, Wolfe explains, because since Modern Art began, about 1900, "literary" is precisely what art is not supposed to be. Wolfe then calls to order his class, *History of Modern Art 101—cross-listed as the graduate level course in Satire*.

Turn to the critics

First came the Cubists, the Dadaists and the Surrealists. People who wondered what their works depicted were not always given civil or sensible answers. Of course, if the artists were cryptic, there were critics to turn to.

"Even an explanation of why one couldn't accept something," Wolfe writes, "was explanation enough to accept it."

When Wolfe considers the goings-on of the past twenty

years, the interplay between art theory and art production becomes as furious as a tennis volley. Abstract Expressionism is answered by Pop Art, to which Op Art replies, asking to be called Perceptual Abstraction. Conceptualism, Minimalism and Post-Painterly Abstraction likewise make grand entrances and hasty exits.

Poor Bohemian

Throughout *The Painted Word* are Wolfe's gleeful comments on the socioeconomic side of the Art World.

From the beginning, the modern artist has been obliged to be a poor and proud Bohemian. To outrage the bourgeoisie is the sworn duty of these garret-dwellers.

So it would seem that the patrons of Modern Art, who are wealthy enough to buy the works, would be the natural social enemies of the artists. But of course the Art world has to be populated, and delicate stratagems are found.

When Wolfe describes the "art mating rituals" of these two groups he is at his best.

He quotes Andy Warhol, an offspring of the odd union: "Nothing is more bourgeois than to be afraid to look bourgeois." Warhol, Wolfe explains, "goes about in button-down shirts, striped ties, and ill-cut tweed jackets, like a 1952 Holy Cross pre-med student."

Wolfe's purpose is not to thumb his nose at all of Modern Art. He is no Philistine.

Like his drawings that illustrate the book, his arguments exaggerate and distort his subject's subtle absurdities to make them more apparent. The art of satire is what he's practicing, and *The Painted Word* is a fine and funny work.



Reprinted with the permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Author Tom Wolfe's drawing of Andy Warhol (p. 74) from his latest book, *The Painted Word*.