

Music

Jeffreys' stillborn hope incites machine gun lyrics

Review by Douglas R. Weil and Michael Zangari
Garland Jeffreys/Ghost Writer/A&M Records SP-4629

Many have tried and failed. But Garland Jeffreys succeeds when he steps out to let loose with a scream echoing his very deep-felt anger—charged with unnerving emotion and padded with a very real sense of total frustration.

The dedication to Jeffreys first A&M album, *Ghost Writer*, is a representation of the whole:

"I dedicate this album to the abused and battered children of the world in hope that we can all make it through . . ."

But to say that Jeffreys is angry is far too simple and in a sense, telling just a part of the story. Still, most major critics have been concerning themselves with Jeffreys' latent anger, but it isn't the bile that bubbles over on this album. Sure, Jeffreys certainly hits with a verbal machine-gun punch on songs like "Wild in the Streets" and "Why-O".

But the tendency toward the personal frustration so evident in the ghetto literature of the early 1960's is the main thrust here.

Getting away

But while Springsteen speaks about getting away and leaving the garbage heap

and death trap of urban living behind, he speaks from dreams and hopes.

Any hope that Jeffreys has is still-born. His dreams are nightmares, dreams of despair, or total fantasy. He knows there is no escape except maybe into the outside world that he just vaguely sees through the haze.

But Jeffreys and Springsteen are different. Springsteen is urban but not quite ghetto. You need wheels if you're born to run, if you've got a ghetto shackle on both legs you pray to walk . . .

Pressure?

If it's not Jeffreys' own innate fears holding him back then it's the pressure he grew up with. "Cool Down Boy", a jumpy rocker with a smooth almost hypnotic reggae bridge, conveys it more with finding than a tangible lyrical base.

"Cool Down Boy" is filled with a feeling of suppression. The youth in him is kicking-kicking to be free—as the silky bridge comes through the heat, almost like a dream, saying "cool down boy. . .". From teachers, "cool down boy", from his parents, from the world, "you better cool down".

In "Why-O," Jeffreys observes the politics of urban busing as the long-malevolent "they" cram racial integration down the throats of all the trampled minorities—blacks, Puerto Ricans and yes, even the

middle-class whites. But "Why-O" is more than the governor telling the frightened children and parents, "Don't Ja-make-a-fuss."

Jeffreys doubts he can become part of it because he has only witnessed this society by looking at night time skylines and silver screen-projected dreams. And that is a problem.

Lacks focus

Jeffreys' anger sometimes lacks a focus as on "Wild in the Streets". From a simple and quiet acoustic passage, "Wild in the Streets" builds into whispered intensity. When it finally flows out, it's torrent.

"Wild in the Streets" is a defiant "what about me?" anthem for those left to roam wild. The urgent and catchy chorus is sometimes whispered, sometimes yelled—a mixture of passion and realization. A high-powered lead guitar line slices through it and focuses everything to a laser beam

intensity. Aside from all this expression of personal emotion there is more than a trace of excellent musicianship on showcase.

The base of the album's sound is soft reggae, blended with the better part of pop rock and straight-ahead rock 'n roll. While all this could end up muddled it succeeds because it never overemphasizes one influence over another and still manages to pay each approach its due.

Specific instrumental are the lilting gospel-based organ and the latin-laced guitar.

The power of the album is not in Jeffrey's lyrical wisdom—it is his worldly wisdom. The music ties this all together beautifully.

Any interjection of honest emotion in a disco-pop mindless rock world is welcome relief from the American Bandstand intellect of a mass-media art.

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