

Rock 'n' Roll With a Gentle Touch

Words like lovely, beautiful and romantic cannot often be applied to rock albums, but there haven't been many rock albums like Neil Young's "After the Gold Rush" (Reprise 6383). It is a delicate, fragile jewel.

In the album's best moments, Young's soft, disarming voice and the crisp, haunting instrumentation, are almost therapeutically gentle in this time of assault rock.



Neil Young

While "Southern Man" is a sociological nightmare in song form, most of Young's compositions deal with such themes as searching ("Tell Me Why"), longing ("Only Love Can Break Your Heart"), reassurance ("Don't Let It Bring You Down") and a certain kind of love/faith expression ("I Believe in You").

Even on "Southern Man" ("Southern man better keep your head/Don't forget what your Good Book said"), Young's outrage over "bullwhips cracking" and "crosses burning" seems more in sympathy for the oppressed than in hatred for the oppressor.

Typical of the tender, personal mood and imagery in much of Young's music is his "Tell Me Why" which begins: "Sailing heart-ships through broken harbors/ Out on the waves in the night/ Still the searcher must ride the dark horse/ Racing alone in his fright."

Through his association with other groups (both the Buffalo Springfield and the loosely-knit Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young) and his own solo efforts, Young has become, quite deservedly, a major rock attraction. This new album, only on the national sales chart for two weeks, is already No. 13.

Young, in his mid-20s, is a tall, dark-haired Canadian who came to Los Angeles in 1966 to get into folk music but eventually joined in the formation of the Springfield, one of the best (and most trouble-ridden) of all American rock groups.

With the Springfield, Young played lead guitar and wrote some of the group's best numbers: "On the Way Home," "Broken Arrow," "Expecting to Fly" and "Mr. Soul," among others. But the group developed both managerial problems and personal problems. Young eventually left, vowing never to join another group.

After the Springfield, he concentrated on his own albums. The first was a disappointment, largely because of poor mixing and some unnecessary orchestration, but the second, "Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere," was quite impressive and has been on the national sales chart for nearly a year.

Last year, he agreed to join Crosby, Stills and Nash, whose strength (as shown on the album recorded before Young joined them) was a superb harmony, but whose weakness (generally) was too sweet a sound and (on stage) too limited an instrumentation. Young brought CSNY both some needed earthiness and a lead guitarist/organist to provide more instrumental range in concerts.

There are some flaws in Young's new album. His slowed version of Don Gibson's "Oh Lonesome Me" is daring but it doesn't quite seem to work. In addition, the vocals and instrumentation seem to have greater impact at times than the lyrics. But music is a total experience and the total experience in "After the Gold Rush" is highly rewarding.

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ALBUMS IN BRIEF: Tony Joe White's "Tony Joe" (Monument SLP 18142)—White, who has a distinctive, deep-dish Southern voice, is an uneven writer. He is at his best when writing about his experience in his Louisiana background (such as "Polk Salad Annie" and "Old Man Willis"), but unable, it seems, to distinguish significant, colorful experiences from rather ordinary ones. Thus, most of the material on his albums is either pedestrian or (at worst) terribly strained. This new effort is the weakest of White's three albums.