

A Low-Water Mark for Neil Young

We've got some bad news about a couple of old favorites (namely Neil Young and Harry Nilsson) in latest installment of the Yes/No record test—the continuing attempt to measure whether an album is worth special attention.

NEIL YOUNG'S "On the Beach" (Reprise R 2180)—Neil Young is one of the most important rock artists to have emerged in the last decade, but he's having his problems. As in his last "half-album" ("Time Fades Away"), there are occasional high points in "On the Beach," but too few, unfortunately, to reverse his downward trend.



Harry Nilsson

I had high hopes for "On the Beach" because Young had recorded another studio album after the disappointment of "Time Fades Away" and, apparently dissatisfied with the results, returned to the studio to make this one instead. But the hopes proved baseless. I'm afraid he should have scrapped this one—or large chunks of it—as well.

In his best albums (i.e., "After the Gold Rush") Young's music had a gentle, almost therapeutic loveliness—a sense of someone having survived a major emotional struggle and able to put his feelings into songs that reflected compassion and understanding.

Except for one track in that style ("See the Sky About to Rain") and one other worthy song ("Motion Pictures"), the tone of the new album is drab, sullen, isolated. Rather than turn his concerns/problem into a sort of universal statement of encouragement, he's on the edge of self-pity in some of the new tunes.

Even worse, the lyrics all too often have a sense of first draft incompleteness about them. There's little of the insight of strong personal vision that made Young's earlier work so impressive. In fact, a couple of the new songs—particularly "Ambulance Blues"—sound like National Lampoon parodies of his own style. Walk on, indeed. NO.

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HARRY NILSSON'S "Pussy Cats" (RCA CPL1 0570) -

There's a certain professional distance that is required between a record producer and an artist that, I'm afraid, pals Harry Nilsson (the artist, in this case) and John Lennon (the producer) have failed to maintain here. If I didn't have so much affection and respect for the two artists, I'd be tempted to call the album self-indulgent. But I think it's simply a case of allowing their own friendship and desire to have a good time musically overtake their musical standards.

There's a semidesperate, emotional urgency (something akin to what Lennon did in his first, brilliant solo album) to Nilsson's remakes of Jimmy Cliff's "Many Rivers to Cross" and the Drifters' old "Save the Last Dance for Me" that I can appreciate after a few listenings, but I think I may be swayed by my fondness for the artists involved. More objectively, the original versions of the songs are superior.

Three other remakes, including Dylan's "Subter-

anean Homesick Blues" and "Rock Around the Clock," are even less necessary. The lyrics, for instance, on "Subterranean" are buried under the Sun-flavored instrumental backing. Thus, we are left with four Nilsson originals. They are mostly melancholy, bittersweet songs, the best of which are "Don't Forget Me," which is

My Life," a call for greater self-discipline that is marred by too syrupy an orchestral arrangement. NO.