

# PERSPECTIVES

## STRUM UND DRANG

**Tracy Chapman**  
Elektra

Produced by David Kershenbaum  
Engineered by Kevin W. Smith  
Recorded at Powertrax, Hollywood

**The Texas Campfire Tapes**  
Michelle Shocked  
Cooking Vinyl/Mercury

Edited by Tony Engle  
Recorded by the Kerrville Folk Festival, Texas

**I'm Your Man**  
Leonard Cohen  
Columbia

Produced by Leonard Cohen  
Engineered by Ian Terry, Francois Deschamps,  
Roger Guerin, Leanne Ungar, Jean-Jacques Peruchon  
and Bill Youdelman  
Recorded at Studio Tempo, Montreal;  
DMS Studios, Montreal; Rock Steady, Los Angeles;  
Studio Montmartre, Paris; and Soundworks, New York

**Watertower**  
Michael Hurley  
Fundamental

Produced by Dan Archer and Michael Hurley  
Recorded at Dan Land, Burlington, VT

Notwithstanding that new generation of Osmonds growing up in Utah, there was no better argument to be made for mercy killing than Seventies singer-songwriters stuck in the early Eighties. The sight of Prine, Goodman, Raitt, Wainwright and the rest groveling for chart success by recording pathetically slick pop albums—albums that clearly didn't stand a chance against the Human League—grew increasingly embarrassing. The intimacy and drive of their music drained by overproduction, singer-songwriters had no alternative than to be put out of their misery by the major labels, who dropped them one by one. Even CBS gave up on the great white hope of it all, Steve Forbert, after he took to covering the Searchers' "When You Walk in the Room" in a desperate shot at a hit.

Trouble is, a voice and a guitar remains the most economical (if not always the most fashionable) method of musicmaking, so the genre couldn't and wouldn't stay dead. Maybe it's the success of "Luka," or perhaps it has something to do with the Seventies revival that's resuscitated everyone from Little Feat to Wishbone Ash, but the majors are suddenly



Tracy Chapman

gung-ho for naval-staring souls with acoustic guitars, of which there is apparently no short supply. "Country" acts like Lyle Lovett and Nanci Griffith are little more than the sort of folkie wimps universally scorned during the new-wave era, yet now they're getting overinflated raves in the *Village Voice*.

Tracy Chapman, a 24-year-old Tufts University anthropology major who became an overnight critics' pet, is better than other pets (and now footnotes) like Willie Nile and Carolyn Mas, but her debut record still takes some convincing. *Tracy Chapman*, framed by David Kershenbaum's excessively tasteful production, is the sort of record hip urban liberals love: she's young, she's black, she's sensitive, and she's singing about unemployment and "the tracks that separates [sic] whites from blacks."

And by now, you've probably read about or heard the Armatrading-like phrasing, the Mitchellish song structures, and the sneaky jazz-folk side of Phoebe Snow—influences so blatant that the raves make you wonder if all rock critics aren't closet Joan Armatrading groupies. But what will make you play this record more than once are Chapman's strong folkie roots (the stunning a cappella "Behind the Wall," which has shades of British folkie June Tabor) and her storytelling (the struggling couple of "Fast Car," the imprisoned narrator of "For My Lover"). She brings such a freshness to the genre that the change-is-gonna-come social consciousness of "Talkin' Bout a Revolution" won't provoke even one giggle.

Michelle Shocked, a Texan with a spikey 'do and an ain't-I-quirky smile and cock of the



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head, isn't so much the new Mitchell as she is the new Phranc. That's not to say Shocked is a lesbian, but her music has the same quaint, dated feel. On *The Texas Campfire Tapes*, recorded live two years ago and available as an indie until Polygram picked it up, Shocked has the wandering-ragamuffin schtick down pat: she sings of hard travelin' in a folkie twang that could be Cambridge as much as Houston, and the chirping crickets in the background are too cute for words. Shocked's early-Dylan stance, coffeehouse chords and talking-blues style are, well, *time-honored*, to put it politely, but the ingenuousness of it makes the result tolerable at best, cloying at worst.

With any luck, Chapman, Shocked and others will eventually learn one of the cardinal rules of singer-songwriterdom: it helps to be at least a little demented. Just look at those who've survived. Croaky-voiced oddballs like Leonard Cohen and Michael Hurley are still fitfully productive, while sensitive angst-meisters like Laura Nyro and Carole King faded just as bell bottoms went out of style. (Judging from her yawn-a-second *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm*, Joni Mitchell seems to be straddling the line.) In Cohen's case, there's some divine justice here: everyone harped on his non-voice and bought Judy Collins' "Suzanne" instead, but *I'm Your Man*, his first record in four years, demonstrates he still has something to say—that is, for a guy in his fifties who could barely sing when he was 20. Having discovered the synthesizer, he proves here that he not only has his wit about him ("Everybody knows that you've been faithful, give or take a night or two," "I was born like this, I had no choice/I was born with the gift of a golden voice") but that he can still write strong melodies. When he merges his sense of song with his sense of doom (and Jennifer Warnes' straight-faced harmonies), the results are terrific: "Tower of Song" may be the wriest song about death since Richard Thompson's "Wall of Death."

Michael Hurley also sings about death on his new album, but he's got different ideas in mind. "Now when I get to heaven, great big mattress... great big easy chair, smell of fryin', greasy chicken," he sings in "You'll Never Go to Heaven." Hurley is the type who makes Cohen seem high-profile: in a career spanning some 25 years, he's only made seven solo records. Every few years he wanders out of

his Vermont home and records another low-key album that ambles rather than blares from your speakers, and *Watertower* is no exception. Unchanged after all these years, Hurley still sings in a sort of skewed Appalachian yodel framed by his rustic guitar picking and little else. And the guy who wrote "I Heard the Voice of a Porkchop" still has a knack for the laconic and twisted ("I Paint a Design," about a guy who, um, paint signs, or "Ma's Dream Blues," in which he dreams of seeing Blind Willie McFell and Ma Rainey). Newcomers should start with 1977's *Long Journey* or 1980's *Snockgrass*, both acid-folk gems, but the cooking groove here of the sexy (for him) "Keep Rockin'" and the menacing (for him) murder ballad "The Revenant" will suffice. Hurley may be stuck in a frazzled-hippie time warp, but as long as he keeps writing songs like "Indian Chiefs and Hula Girls," who cares?

—David Browne

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## In the Spanish Cave Thin White Rope Frontier

Produced by Paul McKenna and Thin White Rope  
Engineered by Paul McKenna

The charm of a band like Thin White Rope (for whom charming is not the most likely adjective) is that their skewed sensibility seems so uncontrived. True, the parched vibrato with which Guy Kyser contorts his singing is pretty obviously affected, but there are other more subtle twists in the Rope's sound—too many of them, in fact, for this to be just another batch of mannered youth bent on adopting a trendy otherness.

Imagine a demented postmodern New Riders of the Purple Sage with spooky vocals and off-kilter arrangements. Now imagine something like that actually sounding good, and you'll have some idea of what you're in for with *In the Spanish Cave*, the Davis, California outfit's latest recording. For every bouncy, back-in-the-saddle beat that the Rope rhythm section (drummer Jozef Becker and bassist John von Feldt) can devise, guitarists Kyser and Roger Kunkel are more than prepared to screw it up with a lexicon of drone Arabian riffs and minor-key power chords.

This subversion of pop conventions also extends to the structure of the songs. While Thin White Rope still occasionally opt for the traditional pop format (verse-chorus-etc.), just as

often they'll discretely toss such formalities out the window. Give a listen to the first side of *In the Spanish Cave* and try to identify anything resembling a proper chorus among its five cuts. The fact that these songs are still tightly structured makes the total effect all the more unsettling.

Mysteriously, the Rope are also able to snatch living, breathing hooks out of whatever idiosyncratic realm they happen to be exploring. Things do get a bit overindulgent now and again: "It's OK" descends into a quagmire of mastadon guitar crunch that sounds like "Rocky Mountain Way" played at 16-2/3 r.p.m., while "Astronomy" has maybe a half-dozen too many false endings. But these are minor sins, easily atoned for by such bent-pop gems as "Mr. Limpet," "Ring" (which features some beautiful dual guitar lines) and "July," which all live up to the high water marks established by "Disney Girl," "Down in the Desert" and "Dead Grammas on a Train" from the band's debut LP, *Exploring the Axis*.

In the lyrical department, Kyser continues to turn some nice phrases (e.g., "I wish that I could turn a sunset into cash"), which work nicely even if you don't have any idea what he's actually going on about in his songs. All this, plus a few extra sonic surprises (like the horns at the end of "Red Sun" and the blusey finger-picking on "Ahr-Skidar"), make *In the Spanish Cave* an eccentric treasure worth the sustained attention required to appreciate its full value.

—Bill Forman

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## Rocky Hill Virgin

Produced by Bill Ham  
Engineered by Joe Hardy, Terry Manning, Phil York,  
Rob Eaton and Bob Ludwig

## Treat Her Right RCA

Produced by Treat Her Right and Bob Holmes  
Engineered by Paul Q. Kolderie

After all the abuse the blues have taken from misguided enthusiasts over the years, the prospect of a few more white boys doing their thing isn't exactly cause for celebration. No need to worry this time, pardner, 'cause both Rocky Hill and Treat Her Right know that the essence of the music lies in playing with feeling, not counting the bars or counterfeiting Elmore James riffs. Slap either one of these soulful numbers on your turntable (or other hardware of choice), and get set for a steamin' good time.