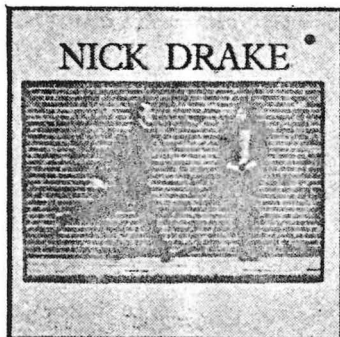


by an artist whose music is both exotic and uncommon. So long as John Kongos continues to work with musicians and producers as skillful and sensitive as those who helped out with this album, I can see no reason why he cannot equal or surpass the quality of his work the next time around.

—JOHN KOEGEL



Nick Drake  
Island SMAS-9307

British singer-songwriter Nick Drake's American debut album is a beautiful and decadent record. A triumph of eclecticism, it successfully brings together varied elements characteristic of the evolution of urban folk rock music during the past five years. An incredibly slick sound that is highly dependent on production values (credit Joe Boyd) to achieve its effects, its dreamlike quality calls up the very best of the spirit of early Sixties' jazz-pop ballad. It combines this with the contemporary introspection of British folk rock to evoke a hypnotic spell of opiated languor.

The intention of casting a spell—perhaps the broadest and most powerful artistic impulse underlying Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks* (which *Nick Drake* resembles at moments, though this is not at all a "concept" album)—is here fully realized. Like *Astral Weeks*, and to a lesser extent Cat Stevens' *Mona Bone Jakon*, *Nick Drake* is an addictive record—perhaps even more than its predecessors, since Drake's voice is so softly, seductively sensual. Add to this Drake's own densely textured guitar, plus, of all unpromising elements, shades of Stan Getz and Ramsey Lewis, plus two of the most melancholy string arrangements ever written—

and you get a head cocktail in which the "astral" of Van Morrison and the "transcendental" of Donovan are still present, yet seen as passively erotic distortions in a pool of sweet liqueur after a couple of downs and a few tokes.

Could this sort of thing be the Muzak of 1984? It would seem a fair guess. So what keeps *Nick Drake* from being the Muzak of today? The variety of its musical thought; the intensity of its aesthetic stance; and the superior musicianship of all concerned. Ray Warleigh's alto sax riffs are thrilling—tinged with the anarchic urban wail; likewise Chris McGregor's piano and John Cale's always distinctive contributions (celeste, piano and organ on "Northern Sky," and viola and harpsichord on "Fly").

Drake's songs vary considerably in style from the delightfully simple skipping-down-the-London-street "One of These Things First" to the Astrud Gilberto cafe-romantic ballad, "At the Chime of a City Clock." Drake's tunes, though more or less derivative, are melodically strong and harmonically kinetic. Their high degree of harmonic sophistication is enhanced by the brilliant arrangements, the most ambitious of which, by Harry Robinson, is lavished on "River Man," a mystical reverie with affinities to "Lazy Afternoon."

"Cello Song" is a tour-de-force of Indian-influenced erotic meditation, wherein guitar and cello (Clare Lowther) are interwoven with Drake's husky voice (itself taking a second cello part) to create the most sensuous of textures. On "Poor Boy," an outright gasp of self-pity, the soulful backup voices of Pat Arnold and Doris Troy repeatedly interrupt Drake's lament with the comment, "Oh poor boy/so sorry for yourself." This mockery of self-mockery is wonderfully ironic, but it also enhances the obsessively insomniac quality of the complaint itself—all six and-one-half gorgeous minutes of it.

Drake's greatest weakness—one he shares with all too many of today's male lyric troubadours, especially those from England—is the lack of verbal force in his song lyrics, which by and large could be characterized as *nouveau art nouveau*. In the case of Drake,

this is less serious a liability than it is for artists who are more up front vocally. The beauty of Drake's voice is its own justification. May it become familiar to us all.

—STEPHEN HOLDEN



Oh How We Danced  
Jim Capaldi  
Island SW 9314

The truth of the matter is that Jim Capaldi never was just the drummer in Traffic; he and Winwood together were responsible for such Traffic numbers as "Forty Thousand Headmen," "Paper Sun," "Dealer," "Empty Pages," in fact, the greater part of Traffic's output since the days of the Berkshire poppies. And *Oh How We Danced* is not so much a solo effort as a re-alignment of the Traffic chain of creation; Capaldi's studio band consisted of various combinations of Winwood, Wood, Mason, Kwaku Bah, Dave Hood and Roger Hawkins (the most recent Traffic rhythm section), and sundry other musicians from the Muscle Shoals and Island studio rosters, horns and all.

As the title implies, Capaldi's album has more than a touch of the good-times-had, hard-road-traveled, been-there-and-back, seen-it-all lyrical theme, counterbalanced by affirmations. It's been a long road from "Heaven is in Your Mind." "All You Need Is Love" has given way to "Love Is All You Can Try," and Jim seems anxious to inform us of that dubious progress towards reality. His love songs ("Eve" and "Open Your Heart") are sentimentally appealing, just as much of the imagery of his philosophical statements is both clever and evocative