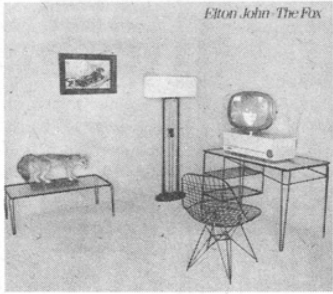
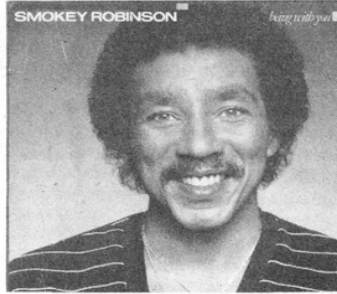


# Records

## Songs of Innocence, Songs of Experience



★ ★ THE FOX  
Elton John  
Geffen



★ ★ ★ BEING WITH YOU  
Smokey Robinson  
Tamla

By Larry Dean

Pop music has always remained an intensely quirky medium for musicians to dabble in. Today, with AM and FM radio stations merging into a single, stylistic groove, distinguishable only by one's ability to transmit in stereo, more varieties of music are being heard on AM radio, simply because it was the popular stations' duty in the first place to give everything a chance on the air-

waves. But pop music had to start with a common and identifiable element, which both Elton John and William "Smokey" Robinson exemplify: the easy-listening, often intelligent, hooky songsmithing that lit up AM radio in its richest years. Robinson, with the Miracles, and John, were two voices that sang confidently of all the merits of working within a pop framework and their many, many hits, including Robin-

son's "Tears of a Clown" and "Shop Around", and John's "Daniel" and "Someone Saved My Life Tonight", to name but a few, are pop music classics in the truest sense of the word.

The late 70's were not vintage years for either John or Robinson, however. After losing collaborator/lyricist Bernie Taupin (who was largely responsible for John's success), Elton put out some rather vapid LPs and kept a low public profile in accordance with his absence from the charts. Robinson, too, produced very little materialwise, and hibernated during his time outside of the spotlight.

It is fitting, then, that these two pop superstars' latest LPs seek to plant them both firmly back in that spotlight. John's *The Fox* and Robinson's *Being With You* are two albums that separately display both the best and worst characteristics of the pop genre.

By aiming for chart success, sometimes at the cost of what originally made their music "tick," Robinson and John risk losing what initially could create their listeners' faces with a smile: namely, the naivety, the amateurism of their performances. There's something oddly soothing and sincere about "Lady Samantha", one of John's earliest tunes, that doesn't appear at all on *The Fox*. The album starts with "Breaking Down Barriers", which reminds me of "(Just Like) Starting Over" on John Lennon's tragically disappointing *Double Fantasy*. It is a tuneful, well-arranged song, obviously geared for radio acceptance, that promises an LP of equally commercial compositions. It delivers on the commerciality, but, again like Lennon's LP, it is a slick, distanced pastiche of familiar ideas that would have fared much better in a less grandiose fashion. Songs like "Nobody Wins," "Heels of the Wind" and "Heart in the Right Place" are overblown exercises in studio mundanity that are downright depressing, and the instrumental dirge, "Carla/Etude", with EJ on piano, accompanied by the London Symphony Orchestra, is boring and wasteful.

The music isn't the only thing that makes *The Fox* such a failure. The lyrics, courtesy of new John collaborator Gary Osborne, are mostly uninspired and typical; but it is Bernie Taupin, back to co-script four songs, who turns in some of the worst wordings of his career. Take this excerpt from "Heels of the Wind":

*How come it gets so disturbing/when two ships pass in the storm/Who knows how high the crow/flies, who knows where this/refugee was born.*

Tripe like this from the man who wrote "Levon" and "Capt. Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy"?

There are some higher moments on *The Fox*, but no great heights are scaled. The LP's better cuts include "Fascist Faces", a John/Taupin tune featuring old-time bandmates Nigel Olsson and Dee Murray, and guest vocalists Rev. James Cleveland and the Cornerstone Baptist Church Choir; and "Elton's Song", co-written with Tom Robinson, about John's admitted bisexuality, is somewhat successful, being poignant despite its leaden treatment.

Where Elton John falls, Smokey Robinson flies. *Being With You* is also a studio album, smoothly played and recorded. But Robinson transcends the modernness of 80s recording technology to exude the warmest, coziest pop vocalizing of his later career.

The title song, already a big hit, is indicative of the overall quality of this LP. Robinson croons romantically over the declarative verses, and never once do you doubt his sincerity; all he cares about is being with his lover. This is what makes great pop music: convincing the audience that the moods and feelings you're singing about are real, emotive, elemental. All music is—or, should be—an attitude, and Robinson takes the words from the lyricists and sings them with conviction.

There are a few slow moments. "Food For Thought," an ecological diatribe, is bogged down by a show-bizzy calypso beat, and the final cut on the LP, "I Hear the Children Singing", about the eternal "child in all of us", is handled in a totally un-original manner, lyrically, and musically. However, the problems are few and the rewards many, and even these two songs cannot interfere with the purveying excellence of *Being With You*.

Going from innocence to experience and singing about the transition are two totally different things, which must be handled with the most adept care. In Elton John's case, with *The Fox*, every wrinkle shows, and a yearning for his younger and more gloriously honest days will be instilled in those who will undoubtedly listen to this LP with an eye on their older EJ albums. For Smokey Robinson, though, *Being With You* is that rare example of a "professional", more experienced person's return to the frame of mind of an innocent, with breezy, enjoyable songs that recall our own halcyon, youthful days. And that, is where pop music began: with wide-eyed, soulful sincerity.

## QUICK CUTS

By Larry Dean

★ ★ ★ SANTANA—"Zebop!" (Columbia)

"Winning" puts Santana, well into their second decade, in focus with the inevitable musical changes of the coming years. Carlos namesake's Mark Knopfler-influenced guitar is fluid and impressive as always, with the band's backup still not forsaking the latin rhythms and multilayered percussion of past LPs. Solid, enjoyable performances.

★ AC/DC—"Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap" (Atlantic)

When I first heard this, I was shocked at the Bon Scott-clone vocalist's perfect emulation of the late phlegm-laden frontman for this Aussie band. But when I spotted the cover at a local record mart, I knew why Bon's tradition echoed on *Dirty Deeds* is AC/DC's second LP, recorded in 1976, with the effervescent Mr. Scott still installed as singer, and was just now being released in the U.S. to cash in on the band's burgeoning popularity stateside. Smart move, too, because *Dirty Deeds* zoomed right into the Top 20 and is still haunting the airwaves even as you read this. And what of its content? Well, Angus Young still hasn't received his degree from the Mick Ralphs School of Guitar Playing, but he was doing his homework back in '76, so if "Highway to Hell" and "Back in Black" make you happy, *Dirty Deeds* will, too.

continued on next page

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