

ROLLING STONE

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He's the Best Dylan Since 1968

Aquashow
Elliott Murphy
Polydor PD-5061

By PAUL NELSON

These days, some of us are beginning to realize we have spent far too much time stuck in the middle of some glorious and familiar Sixties boomtown, and that, while the area still has its attractions, a lot of the real action now takes place up the street. Re contemporary music, perhaps a majority of our overcivilized band of Dylan-Beatles-Stones despairados have long championed the belief that, while there are some interesting newcomers, there are no new heroes (nothing, really nothing, to turn off); with the possible exceptions of Rod Stewart and the Who, no one has entered the white rock & roll pantheon since the aforementioned golden triumvirate—and, so the argument goes, no one ever will again.

Unfortunately, in a generalized Nixonian state of the union, this safe, dead-end frame of mind, whether right or wrong, has managed somehow to pass for realism; under such circumstances, perhaps only reunion, nostalgia, and endless intermarriages are

possible: Once-young Billy the Kid has evolved himself into Pat Garrett who, threatened by a darkening vision, too quickly shoots down the new Billys because they are not the old Billys.

Well, it's 1974, and a brace of fully qualified William Bonneys has arrived. If rock & roll is to grow, prevalent myths may be overthrown (or at least damaged a little), and the new set of upstarts must be allowed the respectful and necessary dual ritual function of slaying the founding fathers while simultaneously carrying on the old traditions. An *auteur* theory of popular music should not and does not preclude new heroes, and the best of these—Elliott Murphy, Jackson Browne, the New York Dolls, Bruce Springsteen, Jonathan Richmond from the Modern Lovers—have learned, rejected, relearned, and now pay homage to their respective influencers by working peripherally in their genres in mathematics-without-damage fashion. Murphy, Springsteen, Lou Reed and Mott the Hoople mine the Dylan genre much as Dylan himself once mined Woody Guthrie's and Jack Elliott's; all of these people are murderers and creators, but they are not imitators. If you persist in that folly, then Richmond is Reed without tears, the Dolls are the Stones with youthful fangs, Murphy's *Aquashow* is easily the best Dylan LP since *John Wesley Harding* (definitely including those by the master), and Browne's *For Everyman* is quite possibly the finest Byrds-Beach Boys-California album ever.

"The quiet lights in the houses were humming out into the darkness and there was a stir and bustle among the stars. Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees—he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder." Although F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote those lines on Long Island in the Twenties about a different kind of romantic hero, he could have been talking about a spiritual descendant who also chose to be photographed in the Plaza: Elliott James Murphy, 24, and also in quest of myths, born of once-rich and internationally famous show-business parents (father now dead), high-school surfer king, world traveler (a trip to Key West to see what Hemingway found there, down and out in Europe and Hollywood), pragmatic idyllist (he once helped his girl escape from a private school in Switzerland, then rowed to freedom at night across a lake as in *A Farewell to Arms*), movie hopeful (a part in *Fellini's Roma* and a real desperation to play Jesse James), et cetera, ad infinitum.

For someone who sounds as if he invented his life from

Twenties novels, Murphy in person is a likable, totally believable, extraordinarily intelligent young man who sometimes seems caught in the shadow world of the potential teenage tragic hero (James Dean's crushed idealism, astonishing good looks, and some classic AM-radio songs: "Last of the Rock Stars," "Hangin' Out") and the gates-of-Eden, strawberry-fields, no-expectations-land of the true gods of rock & roll. It's nice work, if you can get it.

Musically, *Aquashow* acknowledges its debt to *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde On Blonde* (the organ and harmonica, the full, anthem-like sound of the band), but I'm inclined to believe that any Dylan-Murphy comparison is meaningful only because it isn't completely meaningless. Murphy may sound like what people *think* Dylan sounded like in the mid-Sixties, but a careful replay of the records in question should prove the resemblance superficial at best. Vocally, although both are great rock & roll singers, the two are miles apart. Murphy's lyrics are solid, direct and at times less magical and less naive than many of Dylan's, but they get the job done with equal artistry; Elliott writes about himself and those he knows in specific situations and is far more concerned with the actual past, present and future Seventies myths and archetypes of a Long Island super-

punk with too much brains and too many heroes than he is about creating an alternative science-fiction world filled with people totally transformed from their own reality by a more visionary point of view. Murphy pins his hometowners, suburban teenagers and families to the wall as if they were characters in some modern-day Walker Evans FSA photo, and not a stream-of-consciousness allegory.

Dylan's major and most credible theme in the Sixties was one of being rootlessly on your own ("Like a Rolling Stone"); in the Seventies, Jackson Browne, who writes about the costs of staying or leaving, gave us a new anthem, "For Everyman," in many ways a complete reversal of Dylan's earlier stand. Murphy, escape in his heart, tries to understand his roots both realistically ("How's the Family," "Hometown," "White Middle Class Blues," "Graveyard Scrapbook") and symbolically ("Like a Great Gatsby" unites two idols: Dylan and Fitzgerald), but no matter where he goes (to the alleged high spots of the world in "Hangin' Out"), he finds himself in the same place ("I won't be there like some dead fly caught in your lampshade"), desperation setting in:

And don't tell me you don't hear that hometown calling you 'Cause you know what, baby, you're still doing

all the same things you used to do
Whoa, whoa, darling, you never used to wait till tomorrow
And now you can't wait at all.

He seems to want something better ("I got 2000 years of the Christian blues"), something with the glories of F. Scott and Ernest's Paris ("Do you ride on ancient ships under Doctor Eckleburg's eyes to heaven/Ticket 1927"), but the hoped-for conversion never takes place: "Waiting for some dream lover like a Great Gatsby/And then I look into the mirror and it's only me."

But Murphy's magic should be enjoyed, not analyzed; his songs are complex, but not difficult: They are always about something that touches us all. Any one of us can understand the agonized mythic ecstasy of the "boy who knows he's gotta play" rock & roll guitar and be a star ("Last of the Rock Stars"—and Elliott is as good a guitar player as he is a songwriter), the decline of Fitzgerald's West Eggers into creatures from Dylan's *Desolation Row* and Peter Townshend's teenage wasteland ("Hometown"), the lack of communication within families ("How's The Family," "White Middle Class Blues") and between men and women ("Graveyard Scrapbook," "Like a Great Gatsby" and even "Marilyn," a song in which male moviegoers misunderstand

the late Marilyn Monroe). There is a lot of pessimism and real terror here ("But now your world begins with never"), but some hope, too ("And if you love the thought of love Your birth will never end"), because the artist never loses his great compassion or his ability to look at personal relationships.

Aquashow, well produced by Peter K. Siegel, ends with a love song, "Don't Go Away," one of the most beautiful in popular music. Since Elliott Murphy and his work will be with us as long as we have rock & roll, I suggest we play it now.

Who'd mind?
While we're out
Anyway.

