



Night Lights
Elliott Murphy
RCA APL1-1318

by Dave Marsh

In 1973 and 1974 it seemed to many of us in New York that it was a tossup whether Bruce Springsteen, the native poet of the mean streets, or Elliott Murphy, the slumming suburbanite with the ironic eye, would become a national hero first. Well, we all know how that turned out, and while Murphy must be almost as sick of being compared to Springsteen as to Bob Dylan and Lou Reed, their careers have such interesting parallels that it's almost unavoidable.

The crucial difference is that Springsteen's genius was first perceived as lyrical and turned out to be musical, while it was Murphy's music that was originally found compelling even though his literary qualities have come to dominate. But as singer/songwriters from Eric Andersen to John Prine have discovered, good lyric ideas simply won't make up for a lack of inspired musical direction. In addition, Murphy—unlike Springsteen—has chosen to more or less desert writing about his fellow postadolescent suburban expatriates and their confusions in favor of needless nostalgia for the F. Scott Fitzgerald era and songs about urban street life that simply don't stand up to either Reed's or Dylan's.

The gap between lyrics and music was obvious on *Lost Generation*, his second album, but Paul Rothchild's too slick L.A. production seemed to explain away the flaw. *Night Lights* returns Murphy to New York, with his most sympathetic producer, Steve Katz, and his best band, but it hasn't really solved anything. His guitar playing, which used to be thrilling, has deteriorated, and while his use of Arp synthesizer is as delicate as Peter Townshend's is brutal, it doesn't fully compensate. Murphy simply isn't devoting as much concentration to his music as to his lyrics, which is

always a problem with highly verbal intellectuals (witness Joni Mitchell). Too many of the melodies are flimsy cannibalizations of his earlier songs, and some of the instrumental touches—like the steel guitar on "Never as Old as You"—are noxious. When Murphy is writing about the contrasting worlds of debutantes and bohemians, he is still first-rate, as in "Rich Girls" and "Lady Stiletto," the song about Patti Smith. But when he's pining for his own childhood ("Abraham Lincoln Continental") or someone else's ("Never as Old as You"), he's not convincing.

"Diamonds by the Yard" is such a complete success as a spooky post-Velvet Underground mood piece that it would be a mistake to write off Murphy's career. But it is placed, at the beginning of an album that never delivers on the song's central promise:

*Somewhere in these night
 lights lies the answer
 And you can get diamonds
 by the yard . . .
 Midnight I surrender
 I live beneath your ancient
 spell
 You've been my lover since
 I can't remember
 You saved my life with the
 stories you tell*

If Elliott Murphy would repeat a few of those stories, write about what he knows rather than what he suspects, he wouldn't have to call a song "Lookin' for a Hero." He could go out and be one.