



Joe Jackson: Pop-Punk with Reggae Roots

BY BYRON LAURSEN

Portsmouth, England, the dreary naval and shipping town south of London, spawned the prodigious novelist Charles Dickens in 1812 and lost him to London very soon thereafter. Joe Jackson, 25, another Portsmouthian-turned-Londoner, might easily pass for a Dickens creation. Thin, of working-class stock, well over six feet tall, dyspeptic, his rubbery, high-crowned visage topped with tufty reddish-blond hair, Jackson's a dour apparition in the blue-gray November light of a Vancouver, British Columbia afternoon. But on the same night, singing like a loon at Vancouver's turn-of-the-century Commodore Ballroom, backed by a scrappy, economical, reggaefied three-piece English rock band and hopping to the beat like a semaphoring scarecrow, Jackson transforms himself into the center of enormous fun. Had Dickens ever sketched a new wave rock star, an angular, improbable guy blessed more with conviction than good looks, that rocker might be Joe Jackson.

"I just want to come across as sincere, just doing what I want to do," Jackson says before the show. "It's a mixture of 'Let's have a good time' and 'Listen to this because I've got something to say to you.'" His top twenty single "Is She Really Going out with Him," off *Look Sharp*, a gold-selling debut released by A&M Records in February 1979, established Jackson in some circles as among the most listenable and engaging of the new wavers, but others call him a less luminescent follower of paths cut by such English rockers as Elvis Costello and Graham Parker. All three lace pop, R&B and reggae influences with spiteful lyrics, though Jackson comes off as the least complex and demanding of the group. One critic assumed his ambition was "to be the life of the party."

"That's a bit frostrating," Jackson responds. Clad entirely in black from his socks to the buttoned cuffs of his shirt, he

sits cross-legged at the foot of his Vancouver hotel bed, self-consciously rubbing an itchy wrist against a skinny kneecap. "There's just as much anger in my music as Costello's. It's just that with him, that's all he can do. That might sound arrogant on my part, I suppose. But most of the writers I respect — and there's very few of them — seem to like me."

Arrogance might be forgiven one who escaped a terminal gig like musical director of the Portsmouth Playboy Club, as Jackson did, and the embittering breakup of an incompetently-managed little pub-rock outfit called Arms and Legs. Wariness, too, suffuses Jackson's manner. His lyrics, accordingly, pass a cautious eye over relationships, crappy pop culture and contemporary loss of innocence. *I'm the Man*, Jackson's recently released second album, entered the charts in the top 100 and has climbed steadily. But the single release, "It's Different for Girls," has not caught on so quickly. Usually it takes a hit single to put an album in gloryland. While Jackson had wanted the new album's title track released first, as it was in England and Canada, A&M said that American radio stations wouldn't touch the satiric, frenzied rocker with a ten-foot tonearm. Though extravagantly opinionated, Jackson acquiesced. "I'm probably the worst person to pick a single," he says. Which among his songs does he like best, then? "Well, all the songs that went on the album, I suppose. They're all important."

Though he studied music at London's Royal Academy, there's none of art-rock's classical pilfering on Jackson's cleverly, sparsely arranged albums. "Basically, everything I've learned about music that's of importance to me has been what I've found out for myself," he says. "And I've always ended up doing things my own way, whatever was happening." Reggae, long popular in England and currently gaining a wider American audience thanks largely

to the works of apostles like Jackson, Parker and Costello, is an inseparable part of Jackson's way with music. Blues and R&B are much less prominent in the stylistic blend. Backstage, while his tape of little-known reggae musicians entertains the waiting audience, Jackson says he plans to open his next tour with a Jamaican band.

The Commodore crowd, well over a thousand strong, responds raucously when stagelights go up on Jackson and the band. "Listen," he teases them, "If you don't shut up you'll go out of here as ignorant as when you came in." Guitarist Gary Sanford, a visual mix of Roger Daltrey and Harpo Marx who mastered reggae rhythm chops while teaching guitar to Jamaican students in south London, meanwhile scratches out the chords to "Look Sharp." Jackson's episodic advice on life. Alternately half-swallowing the round microphone and dancing a floppy-limbed pogo, Jackson leads the ensemble through a thirteen-song set of mostly reggae-tinged pop rockers. Fans jammed up at stagefront tug mindlessly at monitors and electrical leads until Sanford's Les Paul Gibson is silenced. Frustrated, he lofts it neck first in a thirty foot arc, grabbing his weathered blond Telecaster from a stand as head-shaking roadies retrieve the Gibson's splintered corpse. "Listen," bawls Jackson, suddenly every inch a fed-up schoolmaster, "if you can't behave like reasonably mature ten-year-olds we'll stop playing." Nonetheless, the band answers a lusty encore call with three songs, one of them a quirky Jackson solo on "Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries."

Vancouver is among the last stops on a tour that winds up in Los Angeles, to be followed by a British tour. "Then it'll be Christmas and we'll all get drunk," Jackson says. Dickens, always happy to see a poor boy make good, fond of lively working-class types, would probably approve. 