

LPs

Nothin' Matters and What if it Did John Cougar Riva RVL 7403

John Mellencamp is one of the better examples of what the rock business can do to a musician if he isn't careful.

Mellencamp left his home town of Seymour, Indiana and went to New York City searching for stardom. What he found was a manager and record company who changed his name to Johnny Cougar, put him in a leather jacket, and tried to sell him as a midwestern version of Bruce Springsteen. The result was *Chesnut Street Incident*, an album of Springsteen imitations.

The next line of a story like this generally would have Mellencamp going back to Indiana to become an assistant manager at the Seymour Burger King. But Mellencamp, under

the slightly altered moniker of John Cougar, signed with a new Polygram/Mercury Records, Riva, released one non-U.S. album, and, with his next album, scored a hit single.

"I Need a Lover" was all over top-40 radio in the summer of 1979, and the pull-yourself-up-by-your bootstraps tale of John Mellencamp/Cougar was only slightly tarnished by the fact that Pat Benatar had a minor hit of her own with a far superior version of the song.

I like *Nothin' Matters And What If It Did*, Cougar's latest effort, a lot more than I should.

Cougar is a raspy-voiced singer with a reasonable amount of songwriting talent. *Chesnut Street*, and, to a lesser extent, Cougar's other previous albums, ran into problems because they were based on the premise that he

was something more. The charm of *Nothin' Matters* is that it accepts Cougar's limitations, and, by doing so, seems to turn them into virtues.

Nothin' Matters is a modest, quiet album made up of songs in the mold of Bob Seger's medium tempo ballads.

The best songs on *Nothin' Matters*, such as "Don't Misunderstand Me" (hit single material if ever there was such a thing), "This Time" and "To M.G., Wherever She May Be" work the same territory as Seger's ballads without sounding like imitations.

Nothin' Matters is a record that can be put on the turntable when you're not really in the mood to pay attention; it's a perfect background for reading a book, or taking part in a seduction. Cougar's walking a fine line, and what saves him from falling into the syrup

of England Dan and John Coleyville is his talent for writing lyrics that reward those who decide to listen closely.

Occasionally Cougar goes for shock value, such as the rather explicit instructions a lover gives the singer in "Tonight."

Comic relief is provided by "Cry Baby," a 24-second series of double entendres which, according to the songwriting credits, is "traditional," but will never rival "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" at tent revival singalongs.

Cougar falls down only twice: "Hot Night in a Cold Town," which bears the distinction of being the most feeble Springsteen ripoff ever written (and which, it should be pointed out, is the only full-length song on the album Cougar didn't write), and "Cheap Shot," a bite-the-



hand-that-feeds diatribe about record companies and radio stations.

Even with those two turkeys, *Nothin' Matters* is still six-for-eight, a .750 average which isn't bad in any league. John Cougar isn't a great artist, but he's done more with less talent than many major stars, and he's made an album that's better than it has any right to be.

Phil Bernstein

Black Sea XTC Virgin Records VR-1-1000

Black Sea is XTC's most mature and most commercially palatable album to date, which may finally bring long-overdue financial success to the band.

Well-crafted songs, intelligent lyrics, a sharp sense of humour, strong vocals, unique harmonies and tight musicianship have been trademarks of past XTC albums, and *Black Sea* is no exception.

Singer, songwriter, guitar player and band leader Andy Partridge displays once again that he is one of rock and roll's most talented wise guys. The album begins with "Respectable Street," a rude Partridge ode to suburban snobbery: *It's in the order of their hedger-*

ows/it's in the way their curtains open and close/it's in the looks they give you down their nose/all part of decency's jig-saw, I suppose.

The vocals are delivered with that sardonic sneer, which Partridge manipulates over Terry Chambers' pounding drumbeat and Dave Gregory's metallic guitars.

Other songs are stellar examples of Partridge's unique blend of cynicism and optimism, and his ability to create a memorable pop song.

"Rocket From a Bottle" is an exhilarating love song which somehow manages to avoid cliché; "Living Through Another Cuba" is new wave salsa number about life in the nuclear age.

"Towers of London," is probably the finest XTC song

ever recorded. Showing Partridge at his best, he displays his abilities to take the best of old and new and blend them into something completely original. Echoes of Lennon and McCartney ring out in the haunting harmonies.

The only cut that doesn't work is "Travels in Nihilon," a rock-n-roll raga that takes the "wall of sound" concept to ridiculous extremes with droning guitars, voices, percussion, and basses all adding to a dense fog that is entirely unlistenable.

The individual performances on the album are exceptional. The combination of Gregory and Partridge, both immaculate guitarists, is unbeatable. Chambers' propulsive, quirky drumming and Colin Moulding's tasteful bass

lines provide an irresistible beat. Steve Lillywhite's production is, as on earlier XTC albums, extraordinary.

What is missing from *Black Sea* is the inspired lunacy which distinguished songs like "When You're Near Me I Have Difficulty" and "Scissor Man" on their previous album, *Drums and Wires*. XTC seems to be moving in a more mature, coherent direction, which should please some fans and annoy others. But they remain in a class by themselves, refusing to be classified or pigeon-holed, retaining their own thoroughly unique sound.

Black Sea is a fine album and would serve as an excellent introduction for anyone not familiar with XTC. Those who go for a lighter, more frivolous sound would do well



to pick up a copy of *Drums and Wires* instead — perhaps still the definitive XTC album. An even better idea would be to buy both albums, so XTC doesn't join the ever increasing ranks of talented bands who never made it in America because they did not blend well with the offal which permeates American airwaves.

Richard Redondo



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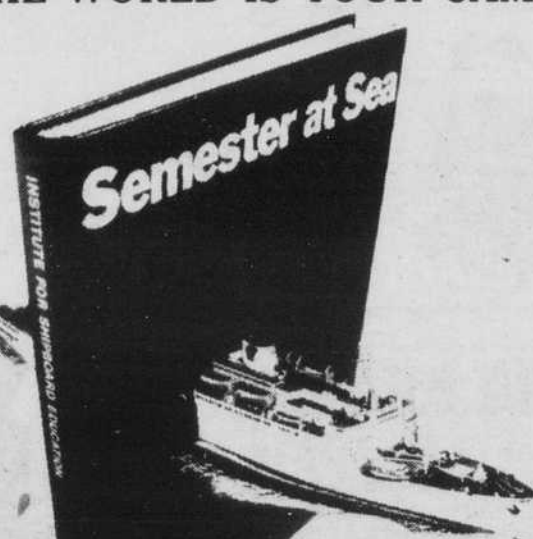
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