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disc-ussion

Johnny gets distracted

Let It Rock
Johnny and the
Distractions
A & M Records

Let It Rock, Johnny and the Distractions' bid for a national audience, is a polished, slickly-produced album. No doubt long hours were spent carefully mixing, rewriting and overdubbing to get everything perfect. As a result, much of what is essential to Johnny and the Distractions' appeal has been systematically destroyed, while at times, using the resources available to acts on a major label, they have aspired to new heights.

The key to Johnny and the D's music has never been their technical proficiency or musical virtuosity, but rather the urgency and intensity of Jon Koonce's voice. Koonce is not a gifted lyricist. The opening lines of "So Complicated," possibly the album's finest cut, pretty much sum up everything Koonce has to say and how he says it: "Five boys in the back of a van / night after night we play, / play and sing that rock and roll / 'cause that's the only way. / Ten years slip down the drain / like no time at all, / didn't somebody warn you / you're headed for a fall."



photo by mark pynes

Once in a while he will capture an image with an interesting line, word or phrase ("Octane Twilight"), but by and large he depends on an emotional response to cliched and conceptually limited verse, through gut-wrenching vocals so seemingly sincere and intense that, frankly, the words are rendered unimportant.

Testimony to the validity of this appeal is their regionally released first album, *Johnny and the Distractions*. On an independent label, it was rather shoddily produced, but at the same time it captured the essence of their appeal. The very rawness enabled Koonce's voice to come through unfiltered and uncensored. Koonce, like Keith Richards during his rare ventures as lead vocalist, forces your attention not because he's a polished, finely-tuned singer, but because anybody who sings with that kind of intensity, under those limitations, demands attention. His singing hits at a gut level that technically skilled singers rarely reach. His voice is not so much another musical instrument, as it is a vehicle for expression.

Let It Rock often stifles the raw expressiveness of Koonce's voice with too much attention paid to production and not enough to the baser elements of his sound. Particularly wounded by the production are two of the four carryovers from the first album, "Guys Like Me" and "Octane Twilight."

"Guys Like Me," once their "hit," is easily the worst song on the album. It contains none of the vivacity of their first album or their live performances. Koonce sounds as if he's dying because he knows he's just going through the motions — you can almost hear him cringing as he sings. His

voice sounds lackluster and contrived. He's changed a few of the words in the refrain, and this also shows how utterly sick Koonce is of singing it. The listener feels as compromised listening to the song as Koonce must have felt recording it. Producer David Kershenbaum should be relegated to producing the next ten Sheena Easton albums for letting this song onto the vinyl.

"Octane Twilight" isn't as obvious a failure as "Guys Like Me." The "national audience" production has taken most of the engaging subtlety out of the song. The faint piano that ran through the background in the first album has been replaced with more guitar, and the volume of the bass is up so high in the mix it hammers down your spine. I guess musical understatement is necessarily precluded with making sure the audience can dance to an easily identifiable beat. All subtlety is abandoned when the song reaches the line "You're a runaway and I'm a bastard." On *Let It Rock* Koonce sings it, "You're a runaway and I'm a BASTARD!" Instead of seducing the listener as the regional album did, *Let It Rock* shoves many of the finer points down our throats.

The bright spots, however, are worth the occasional suffering. "In the Street" and "Shoulder of

the Road," the other two repeats from the first album, are much improved on *Let It Rock*, due mostly to the cleaner, more professional production.

"Shoulder of the Road" kicks off the album, and is really only improved because the brighter production allows the listener to hear and feel it better. It's not exactly a rocker, but a cross between that and a ballad with a climax that will rival even the most turbulent rocker, and is likely to send you sprawling out of your chair.

"So Complicated" is arguably the best cut on the album. Musically the song is simple, but it moves full-tilt and unrelenting to the end. Koonce's voice is at its finest on songs like this, where the chord changes are few and far between, and he's allowed to howl and hoarse it out without the hassle of changing keys.

"So Complicated" is only arguably the best cut because "My Desire", one of the strongest songs in their live repertoire, has also surfaced on this disc. It is the only reasonably slow song on the album, and shows off the band's flexibility, leaving the listener yearning for more. It is a truly wonderful performance that must be heard, if only to appreciate how good a lousy voice can sound.

The other four songs on the album are basically nondescript rock and roll tunes that are competent, but not particularly noteworthy. One can only wonder why the album is named after "Let It Rock", a tired phrase to begin with. Perhaps it was chosen because it expresses Koonce's approach to life: "No time for words / no time for talk / no time for anything / just Let It Rock."

by gordon brown

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