

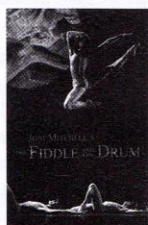
DVD Reviews

Joni Mitchell THE FIDDLE AND THE DRUM

Arthaus Musik
101 347

★★★★★

A modern anti-war ballet featuring lyrics, music and artwork by an iconic Canadian singer-songwriter



Filmed in Calgary in February, 2007, just prior to the SHINE album, the project began with Jean Grand-Maitre of the Alberta Ballet. He dreamed up the idea of a scenario called Dancing Joni and took it to Mitchell. She didn't like either the accompanying poster of an embracing couple ('a little fluffy for the times') or the proposed set list, comprising mainly early songs. She did, however, approve the use of *Sex Kills*, from the 1994 album *TURBULENT INDIGO*, and *The Fiddle and the Drum* from *CLOUDS*, which set the tone for the ballet.

At the time, Mitchell was on the point of launching her photographic artwork *Green Flag Song*. This conjured up a grotesque gallery of latter-day warmongers, using not the traditional colours of war but mainly the greens of a tropical rain forest, plus pinks and yellows. Grand-Maitre saw the images and wanted them featured. So Mitchell set about compiling a new sequence of songs to match—some of them dating from the Reagan era, a couple specially written for the ballet.

Two numbers draw on other authors: *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, after the poet W.B. Yeats, and *If*, after Rudyard Kipling. *The Three Great Stimulants* comes from *DOG EATS DOG*, *Beat of Black Wings* from *CHALK MARK IN A RAINSTORM* and *Passion Play (When All the Slaves are Free)* from Mitchell's *NIGHT RIDE HOME* album. Towards the end of the scenario the mood lightens, and *Big Yellow Taxi* is revisited as a humorous coda.

Like the suspended images, the costumes—supplemented by lashings of body paint—are starkly effective. Now and then the ballet master's small daughter (a vision of innocence in white) flits in and out of the dancers. In an interview, company members Kelley McKinlay and Nicole Caron talk about the demands which Mitchell personally made of the cast. She insisted that they find the right moves and gestures for not only the rhythms but also the meaning of her lyrics.

It is, in the final analysis, Joni Mitchell's primary gifts as a singer and songwriter which make the work so compelling. But clearly Alberta boasts an outstanding dance ensemble; and as a multi-media event that stimulates the mind and the senses, *THE FIDDLE AND THE DRUM* could hardly be bettered. In addition to 50 minutes of dance, the DVD contains the complete *Cyclops* video from the stage design. Further features include a discussion between Mitchell and the choreographer. This production oozes sheer quality at every level. **PP**
www.arthaus-musik.com

Waylon Jennings LIVE FROM AUSTIN, TX New West NW6154

★★★★★

It may have been 1984 when Waylon performed for the famed Austin City Limits TV show, but the music was still very much 1970s Outlaw country and all the better for it.

After he had shaken off the shackles of his early days on RCA, it was like Waylon became another artist. Confident and relaxed, he was singing songs possessing a lean cutting edge. None more so than his cover of Hank Williams' soulful *Let's Turn Back The Years*, and Billy Joe Shaver's striking autobiographical *Honky Tonk Heroes*, the song he claims started the change of the direction of his music.

Dressed in jeans, white shirt and black Stetson he leads his band, the Weylors (Jerry Bridges, Gary Scruggs, Ralph Mooney, Dan Mustoe and Floyd Domino) in fine fashion—impressing greatly on *I Can Get Off On You*, a co write with his good buddy, Willie Nelson and then their signature song *Good Hearted Woman*. While Willie isn't present, Waylon does a loose impersonation of him and as expected gets the audience's approval. His friendly poke at the Outlaw music tag, *Don't You Think This Outlaw Bit's Got Out Of Hand* produces a forceful performance—Jennings readily identifiable electric guitar, the steel guitar of Mooney, and Domino's piano (Domino) laying down that old decisive backbeat to create music of the highest country order.

Jennings, though sadly no longer with us, was quite rightly seen as a master of his day, and influential in helping take country music to a younger, broader audience than ever before. He wasn't all muscle, either—sample his sensitive handling of the wonderful Allen Reynolds' love ballad *Dreaming My Dreams With You*. When it comes to cranking it up, his version of Rodney Crowell's *I Ain't Living Long Like This* has him, Domino, Mooney and Mustoe (dms) cook up a storm that is only matched only by his own *I've Always Been Crazy*—a song about himself that has the crowd go wild. **MH**
www.newwestrecords.com



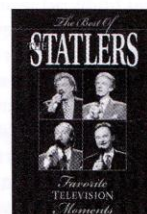
The Statler Brothers THE BEST OF THE STATLERS: FAVORITE TELEVISION MOMENTS

Gaither Gospel Series SHDVD4808

★

A composite DVD comprising songs and skits

The Statler Brothers have always been an enigma to me, possessing very sweet sounding voices but without the grit and feeling I like about country music. This new DVD released on the Gaither Gospel label only confirms my viewpoint. To begin with it is not a gospel DVD as I imagined as only at the end do we get 6 or so gospel tracks. The vast majority of the DVD comprises excerpts from various Nashville television shows, full of banter and American humour, which I found boring and repetitive in the extreme. They are announced at the beginning as one of country music's all time great groups, but backed as they are by a large orchestra the connection with country music is very tenuous. When they do get around to singing, the material varies from World War II songs to popular music standards. The Statler Brothers are very good singers and the closing gospel tracks such as *Church In The Wildwood*, *Noah Found Grace In The Eyes Of The Lord*, and *The Other Side Of The Cross* are all excellently sung, I just wish most of the DVD could have been as enjoyable. Truly this is an oddball release which would only appeal to die-hard fans of the Statler Brothers. **DB**



Tom Russell & Ian Tyson MANO A MANO

Canyon Productions

★★★☆☆

The derivation of *Mano A Mano* is Spanish and Italian, and translates as: 'hand to hand.' Initially a bull fighting reference, it described two matadors competing in the ring for the approbation of the crowd. In recent times, specifically in Spain, it has come to mean two people competing to outdo each other. Filmed over two days—mornings actually—during last year's annual Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, the main feature is a songwriting workshop given by 'the master'—Ian Tyson—and 'the student'—Tom Russell. Russell has openly admitted to being an avid Ian and Sylvia fan during his teen years, and in recent decades has been involved in musical projects with both members of the Canadian folk duo. Russell and Tyson first collaborated as songwriters during the mid 1980s, and, in addition, Tom has produced a number of Sylvia's solo recordings and also collaborated with her on songs and a book—oddly, or is that logically—about songwriting.

In terms of the structure of the workshop, adopting the role of nascent songwriters/musicians, Messrs Tyson and Russell initially focus on traditional, old cowboy and even pop songs. Russell mentions that: 'Stealing existing melodies is the way to begin,' but, additionally, there is no substitute for comprehensive research—in other words, do your homework! In this segment Russell, joined by Tyson, performs *Rambler Gambler* from the first Ian & Sylvia album. There is also a rendition of *Spanish Is The Loving Tongue*, following which Russell performs *Seven Curses*, which Bob Dylan based on the traditional *Old Reilly*.

Tyson recalls how, with his 'creative juices in full flow,' he wrote his first song in just half an hour, in Albert Grossman's East Village apartment, after Dylan had performed one of his latest creations—possibly *Blowin' In The Wind*—at the Kettle Of Fish. The first song Tyson wrote? The classic *Four Strong Winds*. In terms of the creative process Russell alludes to: 'What goes in, comes back out'—of course, bearing the writer's own particular stamp. Russell admits that *Gallo Del Cielo* was not his first composition. It was however, based on a collage of stories people had told him and was written in a garage in Mountain View, California.

Tyson and Russell met during the early 1980s when they shared a bill at the Bottom Line. The relationship blossomed, and in time they began composing songs. While *Navajo Rug* is probably their best known collaboration, there have been numerous others, including *Claude Dallas* and *The Banks Of The Musselshell*. Alluding to a finished song, Tyson offers: 'They're like your kids, off they go,' and recalls how, circa the early 1960s, his first wife Sylvia wrote *You Were On My Mind* while taking a bath in a Greenwich Village hotel near Washington Square. As for Russell's take on collaborating with his hero, he admits that initially Tyson made him 'pay his dues.' It was like going back to school.

In the final songwriting segment the time-served scribes reflect on their most recent work, Russell on his *LOVE AND FEAR* album, and Tyson on a song he recently completed about/for his estranged, young daughter. Moving on to take questions from the audience, one member asks both performers how they manage to keep getting up on stage? Ian's reply is short: 'Alimony,' and goes on to quote Hank Williams: 'Heartbreak don't hurt your songwriting.' Accompanied by a bass player and lead guitarist—the two Gord's (Matthews and Maxwell), at the close of the main feature, Tyson, decked out in a Hawaiian shirt, performs *Elko Blues*—*The Roan Mare* from his 1999 album *LOST HERD*.

The sequences from the Elko workshop last for approximately eighty minutes, and a ten minute long interview with Ian follows. One final thought, the black and white liner cover picture of Messrs. Tyson and Russell is not contemporaneous. I'd peg it as dating from the 1980s. How time flies ... **AW**
www.canyonproductions.com

