

riffs

THERE HAVE BEEN A few basic innovators in pop music, like the Beatles and Hendrix, and a lot of tagalongs of varying merit trying to do it better or to fuse the separate strands. At best, this produces a new fork in the same old dusty road; at worst, it floods the airwaves and the stores with gutless imitations.

This is painfully apparent when comparing two recent releases, the Bee Gees' "Odessa" (Atco SD2702) and Dr. John's "Babylon" (Atco SD 33270). Dr. John is so far out of the mainstream of competitive pop that his incantations conjure a bizarre, fascinating landscape, while the Bee Gees are so in the mainstream that their well-known warble sounds like music to drown by.

Like all animals, the Bee Gees have a noise that they make, a good noise, but the only one they know. So what can you say about another Bee Gee album except that it is more of their quaveringly beautiful trivia? Everything is correct: writing, arrangement, production. But it is such a bland mixture that unless you listen concentratedly (it doesn't deserve it), it all runs together into a monolevel.

It has been said that the Bee Gees' lyrics are good surrealistic ones because they can mean many things to many people. I don't think they mean anything. Shifting meanings? It adds up to psychedelic bubblegum. More than any other group today, the Bee Gees make background music. Something tasty to put on while you're busy doing things.

the village VOICE, April 10, 1969

The Bee Gees will probably be the muzak of tomorrow.

Nothing is spared in the lushness of presentation. The "Odessa" album jacket itself is touchable red velvet. Throats throb in unison with lots of violins. There are grandiose church overtones—slow and majestic. The title tune is about a man shipwrecked on an iceberg that he is carving into a ship to get back home to his love who is carrying on with the vicar—kind of the idiots and the odyssey.

Because they have yet to come up with a batch of songs as good as those on their first album ("To Love Somebody," "I Can't See Nobody," "New York Mining Disaster"), the Bee Gees are all sugary repetition. They do have a place in the constellation of rock, since lots of people with a sweet tooth for melody will go on welcoming every new release. This latest is more refined than anything they have done and the problem with the Bee Gees is that they were too refined to begin with.

Dr. John, on the other hand, inhabits a planet of spiders and

swamp. He is a voodoo doctor dancing around a sacrificial fire. He whispers strange insinuations of savage music. His music is visual. You see him and his potent congregation using this chantsong to blow up Fort Dix.

"Babylon" is the second and better record by Dr. John. Looking like a Jewish Aztec, he is actually a white studio musician

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named Mack Rebennack. Down in New Orleans, he played with the black soulmen and dabbled in the Creole voodoo tradition. He took that tradition—one with a sense of fantasy that creates a new reality—and fashioned a character for himself.

His swaying story-telling is a sort of holy mood music. Its roots are African, and he uses indigenous styles like 5/4 time (which can be quicksand for a Western musician) with a casual easiness. It's a chaotic, pulsating force that worships the universe. The completely foreign, aboriginal sound has an eeriness for us, but we recognize the life rhythms in it and flow along with them. We've encountered that beat in other African derivatives (like jazz), worshiped it in past lives.

The phrasing and rhythmic patterns of delivery are like ancient rites, but the lyrics are mainly contemporary. The songs on this album will likely be done more conventionally, but well, by many groups.

One of the songs, "Lonesome Guitar Strangler," threatens to

extinguish all those guitarist whose styles he evidently admires (Hendrix, Gabor Szabo) and imitates fairly well on this cut. Another, "The Patriotic Flaw," weaves an innocent children's chorus doing "M. Country 'Tis of Thee" in and out of Dylanesque lyrics like "belong to the KKK and the NAACP, I'm a Berkeley student in the John Birch Society, missile erector, a propagandist collector, a woman selector and a Castro defector, a medical dissector and a state's right protector, a professional soldier and a conscientious objector."

You can't visualize this album being recorded in a studio. It provokes feelings of such a real primitive place that listening is like eavesdropping. If you're tired of plastic, here is something incandescent to haunt your dreams.

—Johanna Schie