

My Top Twenty of 1976

ALWAYS a difficult task I think this job has been made harder this year because of the sheer volume of releases. There has been a lot to enjoy this year but also a lot of music which was enjoyable to listen to, but certainly not strong enough to survive the passage of time.

To sort out my top twenty I've received this year a couple of times at least.

1. "Chance With You", Brother To Brother, (Turbo — US):— It really does seem absurd with the spate of Soul releases in Britain this year that my number one record hasn't yet been released over here. Maybe it never will although I earnestly implore All Platinum to take that chance. This is a Funk record that has been in my mind almost since the first time I heard it. Hypnotic, catchy and grooving along, the ingredients for any good disco orientated record perhaps.

But there is something extra on this record. There is feeling, a prerequisite for a Soul record to my mind and there is professionalism in both the musical backing and the group vocals. The whole record fits together so well that it appears to be a perfectly natural meeting of perfect backing with choice lyrics rather than (as with all records) the product of a great many talented people in a recording studio.

This record doesn't appear to be manufactured — it feels as if it was just *there* one day!

2. "Heading In The Right Direction", Bettye Swann (Atlantic):— There is something about a lady Soul singer that grabs a lot of people. It is as if women can more fully grasp the full range of emotions and incorporate them in singing than most men can. Bettye Swann has often been counted amongst the greats of Soul music and this record hasn't done her any harm in my eyes.

In a year that has seen more accent on musicianship than anything else there have been a few records made in the "traditional" style, that is, a singer being backed rather than a singer being one small part of the overall sound.

This is a traditional ballad with the music merely backing the lady who is really the star of the show. Marvellously understated vocals — she never gets into top gear — as Bettye just puts down some real feeling.

3. "There You Are", Millie Jackson (Spring):— If the ability to put feeling in a song is one of the guidelines to good Soul then surely the ability to put feeling into an unreal situation must be a sign of pure quality. Well I'm sure that for Millie Jackson the situation in this song, where she falls for a feller across the room at a party, is unreal — and yet she handles the story line with such honesty that each time I hear the song I can visualize the actual story taking place.

CHECKIN' IT OUT



*Frank Elson's weekly
Soul tonic*

A record, like all of my twenty that I feel I can listen to for years to come and still marvel at the magical quality of Millie Jackson's performance.

4. "Heaven Must Be Missing An Angel", Tavares (Capitol):— One of the most popular Soul records of the year anywhere I would have thought. Some time ago I wrote that I fully expect the Tavares to reach the dizzy heights of "supergroup" in the Soul world and I'm pleased to find that they are now well on their way.

At a time when "Disco-Music" is beginning to have a slightly cheap ring to it with technically good material being released every week the Tavares have been a bright light in a dark desert with music carrying on the best traditions of uptempo Soul music.

Fully professional group singing allied to a backing that compliments rather than takes over the vocals have given the Tavares a handful of albums that will remain in Soul music's Hall of Fame perhaps for ever.

5. "Don't Take Away The Music", Tavares (Capitol):— Well what a surprise! All that I said about the previous record can go for this one as well. When you consider they both come from the same album it shows just how great the group really is. If they carry on this way I may have three or four in my personal chart next year!

6. "Me And My Life", G.C. Cameron (Tamla Motown):— After years of belonging to a small band of people who agitated for British releases from this master I was delighted to have such a quality record released. The fact that it didn't sell as well as I expected it to is a pity but one gets used to that in this job.

The production job has shown, as have many records this year, that there is no way Motown could lose

its grip and the vocal gymnastics prove that G.C. can be a force to reckon with still.

Occasionally I wish I could get really technical when writing about records and go into all the reasons why this record is so good. However I suppose in the final analysis all the words don't matter. It is the overall sound of the record that attracts people and it certainly attracts me to this sound.

7. "Livin' In Love", Sheila Anthony (Route):— Northern fans have had a lot to be thankful for this past year with British releases (although if they're not thankful for their favourites becoming available then they're missing a lot) and this record should have made a great many people happy. Unfortunately, as many people now know, sales were low to say the least.

A happy bouncing record with appeal to anyone who is into uptempo Soul music this must go down in history as one of the biggest misses ever. I've never been able to work out why it didn't sell even a reasonable quantity but these things are sent to try us I suppose — and Route who have been better than a lot of much bigger companies with their class releases.

8. "Sophisticated Lady", Natalie Cole (Capitol):— From another company who have really made their name with Soul fans during the last twelve months or so this smooth groove merely underlined what many of us said when Natalie Cole first burst upon the Soul scene. Natalie is a superstar in the making even if she hasn't quite attained the level yet ... and if not that's only because two albums isn't enough to bestow such a title.

The album featuring this single has been one of the great joys of my private listening since its release and I'm bound to say that almost any track, released as a single would have been somewhere in my top

twenty.

The lady's vocal range can only be described as incredible and her delivery as inspired. A single to listen to in the future with pleasure — and a lady to look forward to as well.

9. "I Don't Wanna Leave You", Debbie Taylor (Arista):— If a measure of true Soul singing is when the artist can make the words of the song truly believable (and most people accept that it is) then this single features real Soul singing.

Every time I hear it I really get into the lyrics and feel for Debbie Taylor who doesn't want to leave the guy but knows she has to unless he changes his ways ... so real and so true. Complete with monologue bridge and an ultra-powerful vocal I reckon this is another Deep Soul classic of the future.

Again, as with so many of my picks for this year, the musical backing is just that, an entirely complimentary backing that in no way tries to take over the production.

I can never decide on actual placings for this twenty — apart from the number one which chooses itself — but I think that if I sat down and awarded points or something this platter would find itself higher up the list.

10. "You're My Everything", Lee Garrett (Chrysalis):— If the idea behind every record made is an accepted commercialism, as it must be for even record producers and artists have to eat to live then this record is a success. It shot up the "pop" charts accompanied by a fancied if not frenetically purchased album to give both Lee and his company their first hit (Soul hit for Chrysalis of course).

After a couple of extremely pleasant days spent in the company of Lee Garrett I learned to appreciate and like the guy and after a few months of living with the record, chart success and all I still find it a pleasure to stick it on the turntable and just listen.

Whether or not Lee can emulate his chart success again I don't know but I do know that I'll always rate this single as one of the best things to have happened to Soul music during 1976. A Masterpiece made all the better to my mind by its acceptance to the "unwashed" masses of chart buyers.

11. "I Wanna Play With You", Frederick Knight (Stax):— Just off hand I can't recall how this did in chart circles but I do recall more than a few plays on Radio One. Easy to dismiss as the kind of "one-off" sound that usually brings commercial success to Soul artists this Bettye Crutcher and Frederick Knight penned song runs a lot deeper than most mini-commercial hits.

It is the kind of song that could easily be covered by a one-hit wonder pop group (and probably will in a few years time) but there is no way that said group will be able to capture the same intensity that Frederick Knight puts into the song.

Not an automatic choice for this list actually but after a few plays a reminder I realised that it is a sound

that I will play again in the future and enjoy a great deal.

12. "Walk Away From Love", David Ruffin (Tamla Motown):— I guess I'm just a sucker for the commercial sound but it is true to say that one of the nicest things about the pop charts (and therefore the pop buyer) this year has been the fact that a great many records that writers like myself would once have described as "too good for the charts" have actually made it.

This superb piece of artistry was one such record and it could have made no-one unhappy as it powered its way up there. 1976 will go down as the year when David Ruffin finally made it on his own, without the Temptations, although it would perhaps be nearer the mark to say that he finally got offered the kind of song that he could have handled when he was with the Tempts. A mid-tempo ballad would be a good, if silly sounding, description of the song.

13. "You Sexy Sugar Plum", Rodger Collins (Fantasy):— O.K. so I know this is a 1973 produced record but '76 is the year it made general release and the year that most of us will remember it for. Perhaps the best Northern stomper release of the year (in fact as far as I am concerned I freely admit that it was the best) it also became for me one of those Northern rarities in that I could honestly sit down and dig it at home. More than just a Northern stomper this record was ... sorry is ... a masterpiece of uptempo Soul music of the kind that regularly gives the lie to anyone tries to hang that "mindless" tag onto Northern Soul.

The production and performance of this record took talent and application of a degree that



Millie Jackson

disco pap manufacturers can only dream about. So it sounds good at home as well but until you've heard it blasted out in a Northern Soul disco and seen a few hundred (or more) people dancing to it I doubt if you'll ever realise the full potential of this truly classic sound.

14. "Look At The Boy", Jean Plumb (London):— One of the few real pleasures left to a Soul fan is that of turning someone else onto a sound that you rate yourself. It is one of the nicest things about this job of mine certainly. And someone who has probably turned me on to more good records than any other single person (I'm going to embarrass him now) for longer than he or I would like to think is Dave Godin. It was through one of Dave's columns that I "found" this record — one that I have enjoyed ever since.

As Dave informs me that this record is in his top twenty also, I'll leave it to him to go into details about it.

15. "Turn The Beat Around", Vicki Sue Robinson (RCA):— Another Northern dance item (I don't think there's ever been a year as good) and very much in the Rodger Collins mode of modern, up-to-date Northern.

Considering the way so much disco music this year has been manufactured rather than talented there has been so much also to be grateful for. Not just a Northern sound of course — it hit well on all disco markets this record, like the Tavares' ones managed to walk that line of vocal and backing getting together without once stumbling. Pure excitement, particularly in a disco atmosphere, got the record into my head, while the soulfulness of the package as a whole enabled it to stay there throughout the year.

16. "Night Life", The Miracles (Tamla Motown):— As with David Ruffin 1976 can be said to have been the Miracles' year in this country. I include this side for exactly the same reasons as Rodger Collins and Vicki Sue Robinson but with one addition. One way in which Soul music has always scored over pop is the high quality of vocal groups.

The Miracles, with Smokey Robinson, did as much as anyone else to shape and form the Soul music business as we know it today and in their present format they are as professional, as talented and as bloody entertaining as they ever have been.

Considering the amount of rubbish turned out by respectable artists and groups in the name of the disco those that I have included in my top twenty deserve our thanks. Motown as a company might no longer be the initiator of all the musical trends but once that trend is established they seem to just wander casually in and with a few choice records take it over completely ... more power to their recording machines!

Yet another "plus" springs to mind on playing the record yet again: just listen to the lyrics — how many other disco records have lyrics with a message? Not a lot!

17. "Movin'", Brass Construction, (UA):— Taken from *THE Funk* album of the year and amidst a

spiralling roar of approval from critics, jocks and punters this tear-away "good-life" single continues to please.

I remember thinking to myself during the wave of nice things when the album came out that this group would somehow figure on 90% of favourite listings at the end of the year. I'm not smug about still liking the single myself because I have to admit that 99 times out of a hundred I'll put the album on rather than the single. This isn't to put down the single merely to prove that the complete album contains so much more good music.

A record of excitement, of vibrations and of foot-tapping feeling. Play this record and some part of your body has to move ... er, should I try to rephrase that? ... you know what I mean, don't you?

18. "Young Hearts Run Free", Candi Staton (Warner Bros.):— Another example of the fact that over the last twelve months or so Soul artists haven't had to compromise themselves in order to get hits. Perhaps more commercial than many sides this record is still a completely Soulful number.

Once upon a time, Soul fans would have screamed with frustration that it deserved to be a hit but it wouldn't have made it. All power to the jocks of both club and Radio who played it so that the general public could hear it. The technique of busy uptempo backing with quietly, almost repressed vocals is a technique that Soul fans will know well ... when the vocal (which is the main thing for me always) is as smoothly performed as this one then I usually go overboard for it ... I did with this one.

19. "Morning Glory", James and Bobby Purify (Mercury):— How on earth this old fashioned out-dated record ever hit I'll never know. This is the sort of record that often brings blank stares from younger, newer Soul fans when those of us who're out of the first flush of youth mention it and yet James and Bobby had a couple of hits with very similar items ... chart hits yet!

A real throwback to the glorious days of the late sixties when many of us were just discovering Blues and Soul, and Soul fans in general were scratching around for any Soul record that came our way. When an import record was still something of a rarity and when any Soul record a little faster than the death march was played in the Soul discos.

Mind you, although this record has a lot of nostalgia riding for it, don't think that that is all. No matter when it's released it is still a classical example of basic music with all the work done by the vocal duo.

All the more pleasing to know that talent can show through after so long. A record I've loved for a good many years and one which I'll continue to enjoy for a good many years to come.

20. "L.A. Sunshine", Sylvia (All Platinum):— So they didn't release my number one for this year (although it's pleasing to note that it's the only import of the list — what a good year it's been for British releases) but All Platinum did do me the favour of releasing this

superlative bit of a groover.

As if to rub in the fact that we've still got a lot of work to do to get Soul music accepted to the mass of people in this country, this eminently saleable record didn't but then that used to be the rule once upon a time didn't it?

I well remember hearing this record for the first time when Alan Dene played it to me in Manchester. It was one of those records that just took me immediately and I'm almost ashamed in these days of supporting local industry that I had to buy it or import rather than wait for British release.

A phrase which has stuck in my mind with regard to this record is something Dave Godin wrote about in his column when he mentioned the "atmospheric feel" of the record. I don't reckon there is any better description than *atmospheric* for this side ... if I could think of another word to replace *classic* I'd use it but as I can't I'll have to say that this record is a cla...aaargh!

As usual I feel that my closeness to the company precludes my including Contempo releases in my twenty but of course there is no way I can finish this without a mention of **Dorothy Moore's** "Misty Blue" which is in my humble opinion no less than *the* Deep Soul record of the year. Were I completely free of association I would put "Misty Blue", **Bessie Banks'** "Baby You Sure Know How To Get To Me" and **Sir Mack Rice's** "It Takes One To Know One" in that top twenty.

Albumwise, this has had to be the year for Soul albums and I feel sure I could have done a top twenty list of albums for this year. Instead I'll just say that my top five albums of the year are "Misty Blue", **Dorothy Moore (Contempo)**, "**Brass Construction**" (UA); "**Heats For The Feet**", **Lee Garrett (Chrysalis)**; "**Breezin'**", **George Benson (WB)**; and "**I Only Have Eyes For You**", **Johnny Mathis (CBS)**...

I also loved "The Best Of Major Lance" on Epic but modesty forbids ... etc etc ... I'm not going to take a retrospective look at 1976 for these reasons:— 1976 has been a year when Soul music has advanced more steps than in any other year that I can remember as far as chart singles go; Albums have finally started to mean something on the Soul music scene; the commercial and funk discos have become better than ever and the Northern Soul Scene has begun to change and divert in ways that most of us would never have believed possible.

In short the whole British Soul Scene has been subject to massive and mostly unexpected changes and as it can only be called a beginning I truly feel that 1976 was the beginning of something very big in Soul music ... the last twelve months have only been a beginning and the way things are going it will be more than a year before it can settle down enough for people like me to look back and attempt to put it into perspective.

I find it really impossible to look back on 1976 with any sureness but I can and do look forward to 1977 with the absolute certainty that its gonna get better for a long time to come.