

Joe Jackson's Evocative "Mike's Murder": A Voice For New York City

JOE JACKSON'S "Night and Day," one of 1982's best albums, made a persuasive argument for Jackson's being the heir to George Gershwin and Cole Porter as pop-music laureate of New York City. His score for the forthcoming movie *Mike's Murder* settles the issue. Although Jackson is only an adopted New Yorker (he was born in Portsmouth, England), and although Memphis actually gets mentioned more times than Manhattan, *Mike's Murder* captures the thrill, danger, and loneliness of being young in New York in the Eighties.

The A&M soundtrack album is divided into vocal and instrumental sides, with the instrumentals largely in the same cool, enchanting Latin-jazz vein Jackson explored in "Night and Day." The five songs make up what amounts to a suite of character sketches. Whether owing to the thematic demands of the film or to Jackson's own familiar skepticism, they are drawn with equal



*Joe Jackson:
the melancholy
of Manhattan*

parts of cynicism, menace, and melancholy. More than anything else, however, they are about uncertainty.

Cosmopolitan, a cocky, surging mid-tempo number in which piano and vibes shadow a pulsing beat in rising and descending minor scales, is a perfect picture of the empty satisfaction that can be the reward for hitting the big time: "See my home, see my car/And the beach always used to seem so far." After this dubious nod to the good life, the album moves downtown to where white middle-class kids live in fashionably destitute rebellion on the Lower East Side. *1-2-3 Go* pinpoints the queasy excitement of the punk underground, *Laundromat Monday* the languid daylight hours that fill the time between sessions of all-night club-hopping. The intellectual torpor implied by both songs hints that the glitzy treatment New York's New Wave gets in the press may not tell the whole story.

Elsewhere the theme of uncertainty takes shape in more romantic ways. Most evocative are the instrumental and vocal versions of *Moonlight*, a song that suggests either a last look over the skyline before setting out for another night on the town or a silent cab ride home down a rain-slicked avenue—windshield wipers swishing in time to a lazy rim shot, organ chords suggesting

the sound of wet asphalt whooshing by under the wheels, the sad, slow, high notes of the piano suspended like the moon over the city. It is a time to wonder: "I think the moonlight is my friend/But sometimes, I'm not sure."

Like the sophisticated "Night and Day," "Mike's Murder" blows warm and cool, lyrical and sardonic. Jackson's playing, whether on piano, organ, vibes, sax, or synthesizer, alternates between restrained sentimentality and nocturnal mystery. In the absence of guitar, these instruments must shoulder the responsibility for melody and harmony. Perhaps it's because Jackson plays them all himself that they achieve so perfect a balance of color and articulation. By wedding his brooding melodies to open, airy jazz and salsa rhythms, Jackson has found a voice for the only New York City that really exists anyway—the one that leaves you wondering.

—Mark Peel

JOE JACKSON: *Mike's Murder*. Original-soundtrack recording. Joe Jackson (vocals, keyboards, percussion, saxophone, vibes); Graham Maby (bass); Larry Tolfree (drums); Sue Hadjopoulos (percussion). *Cosmopolitan*; *1-2-3-Go* (*This Town's a Fairground*); *Laundromat Monday*; *Memphis*; *Moonlight*; *Zemio*; *Breakdown*; *Moonlight Theme*. A&M SP-4931 \$8.98, © CS-4931 \$8.98.