

RECORD REVIEWS

Johnny Shines. With Phillip Walker, David Ii, Nathaniel Dove, Charles Jones and Downy Murl. 11 selections, vocal and instrumental, stereo. Advent Records, 2803, P.O. Box 635, Manhattan Beach, Cal. 90266, 1974. No price listed.

Johnny Shines and Company. With David Bromberg, Mark Bell, Peter Ecklung, Tony Markellis, John Payne, Lou Terricciano, Richard Tiven, Jay Unger, Jean Leiberman, Beverly Rohlehr, Jane Simms. 10 selections, vocal and instrumental, stereo. Biograph Records 12048, P.O. Box 109, Canaan, N.Y. 12029, 1974. No price listed.

Reviewed by Philip Nusbaum

Johnny Shines, from Frazier, Tenn., is a musician who stands inside two blues traditions. In his early years, he was a companion of Robert Johnson, and Shines continues to play the older, intense Mississippi music as well as the electrified style associated with his adopted home, Chicago.

Both styles can be plainly heard on "Johnny Shines" (Advent 2803). The other release to be noted here is called "Johnny Shines and Company" (Biograph 12048); this might best be described as an experiment in the blues. While the latter offering contains some solo efforts in the Mississippi style, over half of the songs feature reed and horn accompaniment, employed in a manner reminiscent of early jazz.

Shines' playing ranks him among the musicians who can be described as "under-recorded." To his credit, he is able to shift from one style to another without coming off as a stranger to either, although his guitar gets lost in the songs having band accompaniment.

Fully six of the songs on the Advent release feature Johnny as a Mississippi-style artist ("Too Lazy," "Moaning and Groaning," "I Know the Winds are Blowing," "Skull and Crossbones Blues," "Vallie Lee," and "Can't Get Along With You"). The others feature the lead guitar of Phillip Walker, David Ii's baritone sax, Nathaniel Dove's piano, Charles Jones' bass, and Downy Murl's drums. The juxtaposition of country and city blues may jar some, but I find that the mixing adds interest to the album, for the difference is not only one of instrumentation. The form of the music itself is prone to a greater degree of interpretation and improvisation in solo, country performance. For example, a "12-bar" blues comes out with slightly less or more than 12 bars in some of Shines' solo pieces. (It may be that the stricter adherence to the 12-bar format in Chicago blues is a concession to group playing.) This feature, as well as Shines' technique of slightly varying the placement of chord changes, is prominent on "Too Lazy." The band (heard on "Give My Heart a Break," "Try a Little Tenderness," "Just Call Me," "My Love Can't Hide," and "Have to Pay the Cost") is more than solid: It really rocks.

Of course, there is not much here, other than the music, which lends itself to presentation-of-the-blues-in-the-classroom. The liner notes are descriptive of the artist's life, and evoke the names of Robert Johnson, Charlie Patton and Howlin' Wolf in relation to Shines mostly in the interest of sales. Anyone who needs to have the music explained will have to apply his own understanding of the blues, or look elsewhere. However, aside from the academic notions of annotation and description, the music is highly recommended.

"Johnny Shines and Company" (Biograph) is another case entirely. It's not that the music reaches heights or depths unattained by the Advent record, but that its "early jazz" style accompaniment sets it off as a sound against which there is no comparison within contemporary blues. Let us say that it is an interesting record. While the band bears some similarities to Chicago-style playing, it is interesting to hear how the same root ideas about musical accompaniment reach different fruition. We may typify each as riff-like. In the Chicago style, usually one instrument will predominate back-up playing, while the other instruments serve as an underpinning to the "lead" back-up riffs. The back-up instruments on "Johnny Shines and Company" play in a riff style, but often more than one instrument riffs at the same time in an overlapping and complementary fashion, not unlike early New Orleans jazz. "Blood Ran Like Rain" is especially successful in this regard.

"Jim String," the last cut on the album, is an interesting narrative piece about a fellow named Jim String who shoots his girl friend for being caught in the company of a certain gentleman. Jim is then caught while trying to make his getaway. The song is "talked" on top of Shines' slide guitar. Unfortunately, here the "experiment" falls down, as someone found it necessary to direct the violinists to play a continuous tone during each verse, which reaches its loudest point right before the chorus, before dropping out. Perhaps it is an attempt to "increase narrative tension," but I find that the violins never get loud enough to effect a tension, and the whole idea is an annoying obstruction to everything else that goes on in the piece.

The leader of the backing ensemble is the reknowned New York folkie Dave Bromberg. Best known as a guitarist, Dave takes a stab at the mandolin on "I'm Getting Old." As a mandolinist, Mr. Bromberg is a very fine guitarist.

"Johnny Shines and Company" is alternately solid and disorganized. It is recommended for the collector with a passion for old wine in new bottles, or a taste for marginal forms. The album might be used to show the deep organization and surface dissimilarity of Black music's substyles. As with the Advent record, the disc's accompanying notes serve mainly to introduce the disc; they do not explain.

Both records address themselves to a popular audience. As such, "Johnny Shines" is recommended. "Johnny Shines and Company" is recommended to the blues fan with a taste for the unusual.