

Freeman and Lange. Doug Freeman, Don Lange, with Alan Murphy, Larry Key, Mike Stone, Dan Keeley, John Dunlap, Martin Henry. 12 selections, vocal and instrumental, stereo. Flying Fish 011, 3320 N. Halsted St., Chicago, Ill. 60657, 1975.

Lycurgus. Peter Lang, with Bill Evans, Cal Hand, Dick Hedland, Bill Hinkley, Craig Ruble, Butch Thompson, and Peter Ostrousko. 10 selections, vocal and instrumental, stereo. Flying Fish 014, 3320 Halsted St., Chicago, Ill. 60657, 1975.

Reviewed by James P. Leary

Always lurking about the borders of traditional music are guitar-armed intellectuals searching for folk stuff from which to forge their own artistic identities. Eclectic, these "folk singers" draw on earlier forms: blues, jazz, old time and bluegrass stringbands, ballads. Perhaps fortunately, only peculiarly gifted individuals (Ry Cooder, Dave Van Ronk, Dan Hicks, Leon Redbone) are able to synthesize such disparate elements into a distinctive style and emerge as compelling talents. More frequently, inhabitants of the "folk" scene churn out unsatisfying, imitative pot-pourris relying on romantic hokum and technological showiness instead of real music. Connected only tenuously to recognizable places and people, this material, like bad poetry, occupies a void lacking either the cultural vision of the folk performer or the personal artistry of successful reformulators. At worst, such music finds quintessential expression in pieces like John Denver's "Rocky Mountain High" or Mason Williams' "Classical Gas"; at best, it is captured in mildly entertaining, forgettable albums like the two reviewed below.

"Freeman and Lange" emanate from Iowa. Like "Brewer and Shipley," who sometimes sing about neighboring Nebraska, they rely on tight vocal harmonies hovering over an instrumental base of melodic guitar work. Tasteful back-up playing on fiddle, mandolin, base, pedal steel, reeds, and trombone floats in and out when appropriate.

Don Lange, who holds an M.F.A. in creative writing and has published poetry, is responsible for eight of the dozen cuts. Seven of them are predictable. Assuming socially acceptable personas of right-on liberal and sensitive lover, Lange offers four protest numbers: "The Non-Smokers' Liberation Front Anthem" is just what it says; "Song for Allende" is a truck driving ditty which connects American commercialism with the Chilean president's death; "The Modern Army Can't Fight Song," with its John Prine vocal, appears to have been written at the height of the Vietnam war and dusted off for this session; and "The Dying River" skewers strip mining. The three love songs--"Bronze and Steel," "The Lady's Song," and "Northern Lights"--are plaintive, too-pretty pieces full of metaphors about love and changes. There's nothing wrong with either Lange's politics or his sentiments, but why does he have to sing about them in a bland manner which renders him indistinguishable from countless other earnest young men?

Only once does Lange step out of pious character to sing about an accessible human experience. "Old Wooley" concerns a farmer who, bragging he once played

with Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, gives a bar full of longhairs a night to remember. It carries the line of the album: "he drinks a case at night because he drives a Case all day."

Perhaps in reaction to the pretensions of his partner, Doug Freeman's main contributions are two shuffling, silly-worded, ragtime pieces sung in a lazy, gravelly style ("The Barefoot Rag" and "Don't /Pass Me By/") and a delightfully lethargic number ("Sit Back So Easy") about indolence and apathy. "The Gold Watch" however, is a cliché-ridden lament about an old man turned out by his company, who now becomes "just a name on a gold watch and chain."

While trite lyricism is nowhere present in Peter Lang's *Lycurgus*, his fast-fingered guitar playing, association with Minneapolis, and geese-fart voice suggest he might well be a clone of Leo Kottke (although he's older, fatter, and grizzlier in appearance). "Round Worm Reel," "Green Apple Quickstep," "Lycurgus," "The Connecticut Promissory Rage," and "Flames Along the Monongahela" (which seems to be an exploration of the musical possibilities of "Down in the Boondocks") are the record's core. All five showcase Lang's rapidfire, complex riffing. For ears attuned to the intricacies of string-picking, these non-melodic, driving extravaganzas may be thrilling, but for those who like songs with singing, reasonable lyrics, and the interplay of instruments, these cuts could be passed up.

More appealing is a pleasant Dixieland arrangement of Blind Blake's "That Will Never Happen No More" and a bluegrass rendition of "Poor Howard" (featuring deft help from ex-"Sorry Mothers" jugband stalwarts Cal Hand and Bill Hinkley). "Untitled Oblivion" and "Zero Adjustment," with their country fiddle and steel guitar backing, are stark, growling laments about existential terror and ill-treatment by a woman. "Let the Old Boy Go" is either an awful imitation or a hilarious parody of John Prine's recent "Please Don't Bury Me." But so what!

Although these albums are recorded in small regional studios and distributed on "folk" labels, they have little or nothing to do with either their surrounding milieu or what is generally considered to be "traditional," except in a second- or third-hand way. In actuality, they are comprised of an ersatz sort of material aimed at a national audience clamoring for pseudo folk music (Fake music?).