

Nobody Knows What You Do. John Hartford, with Benny Martin, David Briggs, Sam Bush, et al. 12 selections, vocal and instrumental, stereo. Flying Fish 028, 3320 Halstad St., Chicago, Ill. 60657, 1976.

Reviewed by Bob Blackman

About the best thing that can be said for Nobody Knows What You Do is that it's a slight improvement over John Hartford's previous record, Mark Twang (reviewed in Folklore Forum 10 (Spring) 1977; 10:1). This is due not to Hartford but entirely to the welcome addition of some fine sidemen (absent on the earlier release). Their hot picking compensates for the further deterioration of Hartford's songwriting.

Hartford's sense of humor, always his strongest point, has become plain silly. Lyrics like "The Golden Globe Award" (singing the praises of his girl's "golden globes") and "Cranny Won'tcha Smoke Some Marijuana" are at a high school level of self-conscious sniggering. "The False Hearted Tenor Waltz" expresses his desire to sing that high lonesome bluegrass tenor, and would be one of the record's more successful cuts if Hartford's "comic" falsetto weren't so grating. The title song is so completely pointless that it's hard to understand why anyone would bother to write it, let alone record it.

The one serious song is "In Tall Buildings," another in a long line of "Oh, life in the city is such a drag" compositions that are churned out by every songwriter in the business. The lyrics here are as trite as most such songs, but at least it's nice to hear one track sung "straight." Most of the other so-called songs are just words thrown together between long instrumental breaks.

The musicians are quite good, especially Sam Bush on mandolin and Buddy Emmons on pedal steel. The other back-up pickers include Benny Martin, Mac Wiseman, David Briggs, and Jimmy Colvard. Their efforts are what makes this album listenable; without them, every track on this record would be dismissed as filler. The songs are weaker--musically and lyrically--than any of Hartford's previous 11 albums.

Both Mark Twang and Nobody Knows What You Do are fairly brisk sellers at my local folk music store, and the former album actually won a Grammy Award for "Best Ethnic Recording" (which is itself a funnier joke than anything in Hartford's songs!). To see such mediocre and self-indulgent efforts receiving attention on the strength of Hartford's fame--while some truly stunning releases on folk/country labels like Rounder, County, and Folk-Legacy are virtually ignored--is one of the saddest indictments of the recording industry.