

# A sensitive 'Unsung Guitar' Record review

By Ken Marks

**Y**OU WON'T be going very far out on the old limb when you say that "Unsung Guitar" is the best album ever released by a Pittsfield annuity salesman. But you can go further than that. John Lehmann-Haupt is a highly accomplished musician and this recorded acoustic guitar work is sensitive, complex and frequently very beautiful.

Lehmann-Haupt was playing away in a Cambridge music store — so the Lana Turner-esque story goes — when a representative for a small local label called Physical Records wandered in and was impressed by what he heard. "Unsung Guitar" is the result of that crossing of paths.

The 29-year-old Washington, Conn., native is classically trained, having earned his degree in music from Marlboro College in Vermont. He's now living on Pomeroy Avenue and working for Security First, selling tax shelter annuities.

Taken as a group, most of the selections on his "Unsung Guitar" comprise a virtual anthology of the rock era's prettiest melodies. The choice of material works decidedly in Lehmann-Haupt's favor. The guitar can afford to be "unsung." Because of the familiarity factor, most listeners will have the words and music of these songs deeply imbedded in their hearts and minds. They're already favorites. Any new light Lehmann-Haupt can shed on these compositions will be regarded as yet another link to a friendly old musical companion.

Sometimes Lehmann-Haupt's interpretation of these chestnuts is traditional, sometimes out of the ordinary. He can be effective with either approach. On Jagger-Richard's "As Tears Go By" and on "Amazing Grace," the feeling conveyed is largely what we've come to expect from these tunes. That doesn't mean that they are simply rote re-creations of old arrangements. They're not. But the original, graceful spirit of the songs is lovingly preserved. Particularly engaging on these two tracks is Lehmann-Haupt's method of having the melody flow from different parts of the guitar. One melodic phrase might be composed of notes from the bottom strings, full chords and the customary higher notes.

By way of contrast, we get a slightly different slant on Jagger-Richard's "Let's Spend the Night Together" and the medley of James Taylor's "Fire and Rain" and Gaye and Stevenson's "Dancing in the Streets." These interpretations are more uptempo than the originals. The Stones' own version was pretty fast itself, of course, but its rhythmic kinks are more fully explored here, with Lehmann-Haupt tapping the body of the guitar for percussive emphasis. There's an airier feel to the tune than one might have expected possible.



Vicki Sanders

John Lehmann-Haupt fingers his unsung guitar.

On both tracks, the melody seems to bubble up naturally from the rhythmic ground spring Lehmann-Haupt explores. The medley concentrates on "Fire and Rain" and it seems to be the repeating "thought I'd see you" phrase that forms the melodic link with "Dancing in the Streets." And it's the classic rock chording of the arrangement that leads the guitarist into a brief quote of Petula Clark's "I Know a Place" at the end.

"Let's Spend the Night Together" and the medley exhibit Lehmann-Haupt's technique of finding a chord change he likes, then playing with it, suspending the melody for a time, creating a nice tension before bursting back to the song's own flow.

Occasionally, Lehmann-Haupt augments his solo guitar with drums and/or his own over-dubbed bass. That proves to be a mistake, generally. He has the technical command to give us a fully conceived arrangement with the instrument

unadorned. The melody, the bass line, the harmonies, the syncopation are all there at his 10 fingertips. The plodding addition of other sounds on Carole King's "You've Got A Friend," for instance, tends to de-mystify an otherwise considerable accomplishment.

And on Jagger-Richard's "Lady Jane," Lehmann-Haupt's approach is clearly wrong-headed, sacrificing one of the Stones' tenderest melodies to a mundane bossa-nova beat. On the other hand, Lennon-McCartney's "And I Love Her," done as a solo, is a model of subtlety. The natural tendency toward a Latin rhythm exerts its gentle pull, and some notes of the melody are purposely left unplayed as the tune proceeds seemingly self-propelled.

It's those understated moments, when the listener can add something of his own to Lehmann-Haupt's virtuoso canvas, that give "Unsung Guitar" its greatest measure of success. ■