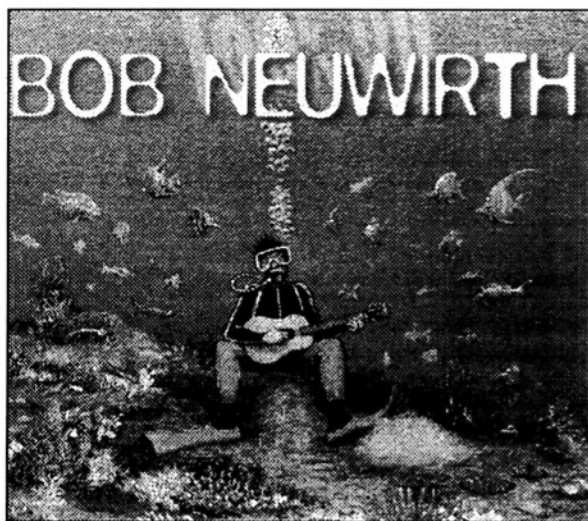


NEW COUNTRY

Songwriters



BOB NEUWIRTH *Look Up*

WATERMELON

★ ★ ★ 1/2

Bob Neuwirth is best known for his friendships; he wrote "Mercedes Benz" with Janis Joplin, co-starred in Bob Dylan documentaries *Don't Look Back* and *Eat the Document*, rambled with Jack Elliot, recorded with John Cale and produced T-Bone Burnett. Neuwirth endeared himself to these stars not only because of his legendary partying capacity, but because he was a painter and singer-songwriter himself, though for a long time his music-making was largely confined to private parties. He made three albums for Asylum in the '70s, but only one was released; he made two for Gold Castle in 1988-90, and now he has reemerged with *Look Up*.

Look Up is a sort of travel diary. During a three-month trip from the West Coast to the East Coast and Europe, Neuwirth visited old pals, made music with them and recorded it live to a portable DAT. The spontaneity of Neuwirth's

methodology results in a sparkling charm when everything clicks and a home-movie self-indulgence when everything doesn't.

Fortunately, things click more often than not. Some of the best moments were captured at Steven Soles' garage in Santa Monica, where Neuwirth formed a impromptu string band with Soles and David Mansfield, his old running buddies from Dylan's Rolling Thunder Review. When Billy Swan showed up, he and Neuwirth wrote a funny, bouncy rockabilly number called "What's Our Love Comin' To" and sang it with Rosie Flores. Even better were the two songs Neuwirth wrote and sang with Peter Case, "Traveling Light" and "Beyond the Blues," both of them world-weary and street-wise descriptions of pain so enduring it defies complaint.

Neuwirth wrote another song with Case—a witty, Guthriesque tale of plans going awry called "Everybody's Got a Job to Do"—but he recorded it with Butch Hancock at Hancock's art gallery/club in Austin. While in town he also taped the Townes Van Zandt-like "Blue Detour" with Charlie Sexton. On these songs you can hear that Neuwirth picked up more from Dylan and Elliot than just bad habits. He has a gift for the pithy phrase and the simple guitar figure. His scratchy voice has a cramped range, but like his mentors he compensates for his musical limitations with an actor's interpretive skills.

At other times, though, Neuwirth's devotion to the moment leaves the listener with a head-scratching, I-guess-you-had-to-be-there reaction. Maybe he thought it was hip to leave the ringing telephone on the version of "Sweet and Shiny Eyes" taped in Elliott Murphy's Paris kitchen, but it's just annoying. Ditto for Patti Smith's mumbly vocal on "Just Like You." Despite these false steps, the 16-track *Look Up* has at least 10 terrific cuts. It's Neuwirth's best album and goes a long way toward explaining why he's such an underground legend.

—Geoffrey Himes