

# Records

## The Many Phases of Neil Young



Neil Young

"Decade." Neil Young. Reprise 3RS 2257.

● It's always been difficult isolating Neil Young's best songs. There's simply too much to choose from. Was his finest work in the '60s with Buffalo Springfield or later with Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young? Or was it in his striking solo albums or even—some fans speculate—in his large backlog of unreleased material?

"Decade" solves the problem in the simplest way possible: it picks something from every period. For this three-record set Young has chosen five Springfield songs, two CSNY tracks, more than two dozen solo cuts and four unreleased songs. But do Neil Young's whiny voice and often depressing lyrics really merit six sides of vinyl? Most will agree they do.

Young has long been one of the most appealing and enigmatic singer-songwriters in rock music. His earliest albums alternated idealized portraits of dream women ("Cowgirl in the Sand," for example) with outraged social protests ("Southern Man," "Ohio"). Working in an expressive, country-tinged style, Young seemed torn between romanticism and alienation.

But on his later solo albums, the music became starker and less commercial, the lyrics increasingly dark and forbidding. His "Tonight's the Night" LP in 1975 was the culmination of this direction. It was a mixture of rough, jagged music and naked outrage over the drug-related deaths of two friends; one of his best albums, it was also his poorest selling. Works since then have moved toward a more com-

mercially palatable, smoother style that retains the rough intensity of "Tonight's."

"Decade" shows that Young's music had a raw urgency even before his bleak period. Regardless of the subject matter, his songs are often distinguished by a gripping, uncompromising tenaciousness.

But Young can still be commercial. "I Believe in You," "After the Goldrush" and this album's newest song, the Stills-Young Band's "Long May You Run," are all slick but still memorable. And Young has created a string of classics by charging his ballads with swirling music and long solos; here, "Cowgirl in the Sand" and "Cortez the Killer" stand out.

Still, this collection is not flawless. 1972's "Harvest" was Young's best-selling and most commercial album, but it is no match artistically for the likes of "After the Goldrush" and "Tonight's the Night." "Harvest," though, is represented here by five songs, more than any other album. And the unreleased songs, except for the forceful "Winterlong," are hardly on a par with the rest of the album.

But a few disappointments aren't glaring when spread out over three records. More than any single album could be, "Decade" shows the artistry and power of this important artist. A perfect gift, it's both an impressive introduction to and a comprehensive 10-year sampler of Young's shifting moods. Sometimes elusive, he's rarely commonplace. That alone is a valuable trait in the conservative pop scene of the '70s. ●

—STEVE POND