

AUDIO FILES

Paul Simon

The Rhythm of the Saints

This album features percussionists from Brazil, guitarists and singers from Africa and lyrics in Portuguese from Milton Nascimento. But it doesn't sound even remotely odd or exotic. That's one indication of how influential Simon's last album — *Graceland* — really was.

That record introduced a slew of world-class performers like Ladysmith Black Mambazo to an international audience. *The Rhythm of the Saints* may not have the benefit of revelation, but it's still a worthy successor.

Each song is built around a pulsing mid-tempo rhythm overlaid with Simon's witty and subtle lyrics. The basic tracks were taped at studios in Brazil and New York or captured wherever they were found, such as the propulsive, dynamic drumming on "The Obvious Child," which was recorded live in the town squares of Salvador and Brazil.

The result is a sinuous, winding set of tunes that flow one into the other with ease. It slides from the delicate tension of "Can't Run But" to the sad acceptance of "She Moves On" and its soft but persistent beat.

The lyrical territory covered by these songs is equally expansive. Simon has specialized in the careful, studied observation of lovers who are more vulnerable than they want to admit. But his lyrics have grown increasingly enigmatic and elliptical. They now depend more on vivid imagery and philosophical musings than a clear storyline for their effect.

In "Further to Fly," Simon will happily follow a simple, striking line like, "Maybe you will find a love/ That you discover accidentally/ Who falls against you

gently/ As a pickpocket brushes your thigh," with the emphatic statement that, "The open palm of desire wants everything/ It wants everything."

Even more mysterious is "The Obvious Child." In it Simon sings, "Some people say a lie is just a lie/ But I say the cross is in the ballpark/ Why deny the obvious child?" Why indeed? What exactly the obvious child may be is anyone's guess.

A constant theme is religion. In "Proof" it's seen as something nice, but not much use in the everyday world. "Sane people go crazy on you/ Say 'No man, that was not the deal we made/ I got to go, I got to go/ Faith, faith is an island in the setting sun/ But

proof, yes proof is the bottom line for everyone." It reappears again in the Biblical imagery of "Born At the Right Time" and on "The Cool, Cool River."

There's also an air of sadness and resignation on *The Rhythm of the Saints*. "The Cool, Cool River" ends with the plaintive comment that, "My life's so common it disappears/ And sometimes even music cannot substitute for tears." A man is abandoned by his lover in "She Moves On." The narrator of another track is tired of living but realizes he still has "further to fly, further to fly."

Overall, *The Rhythm of the Saints* is a rich song cycle that shifts and turns as swiftly as the compelling rhythms that lie at its core. Remarkably, it proves Paul Simon — an artist who has been recording for more than 20 years — is still growing in talent and insight.

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

