No, the ink on the cover doesn't run and smear when you break the plastic wrap, and the jacket is not going to eventually disintegrate. No, it's not a five dollar album of all the things heard when Neil Young toured in early 1971, or that are on Young Man's Fancy or Live at Carnegie Hall. How 'bout a Teen-Age Tail Come Down or any of the other coverless bootlegs from that tour. (And no, 'Sugar Mountain' is not on the record - check out the flip side of 'Heart of Gold'.) It's just a Neil Young album since After The Gold Rush almost a year and a half, and it's called Harvest. It shows what has made Neil Young the uniquely most important, and best, musician/artist of his generation.

Harvest covers a lot of ground, with Neil Young having found himself a fine backup band in the Stray Gators, to replace the long-since-departed Crazy Horse, and who feel comfortably in his band of a kind that paves you in the gentlest way, with voice and keyboard, in stomach with bass and drums. The Stray Gators do just that, and construct a planetarium style. But the prologue features an astral projection to the future, as Neil Young dabbles in a variety of styles. On seven of Harvest, Neil both sings and plays his electric guitar; on the other three, the songs are built around electric piano, electric bass, electric guitar, and Neil's voice. The effect is more like the mixture of styles for a show like That's Incredible or The Midnight Special, than the symphonic or rock' n' roll shows of Neil's earlier days. But one has to look more closely at the songs themselves and their structure, than merely occasionally give off-e.

There is no real cohesiveness here, and to some, the harmonic and orchestral passages are too weak. But, when Neil Young gets into full gear, he knows how to build up to get his point across. One can listen to his songs and say, 'Is that what he meant?' But with the exception of 'The Damage Done' (which was performed almost identically on a Johnny Cash show last year), the older songs reduce to different arrangements. 'Heart of Gold' underwent the most drastic change since his January 21, 1971, Boston gig; played live, it was a segment of 'A Man Needs A Maid' played on solo piano. On later bootlegs, it had become a song unto itself, on guitar and harmonica and it is essentially a bootleg-up version of that which was released as the single from the record.

Yet the feeling of Harvest is a definite shift from that of After The Gold Rush, on, for that matter, Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere or Neil Young. It is a study in contrasts to a degree not even approached by the other three; perhaps the closest comparison is the Neil Young songs included in Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young's Deja Vu. The loneliness is still there in a song such as 'Out on the Weekend.' Yet it has mellowed, and it is not the stark denunciation of 'Don't Let It Bring You Down.' Musically, the twice-like quality of much of his previous work still tools a song like 'There's a World' or 'A Man Needs A Maid.' But 'Harvest' contrasts, both with a lighter melody (as does 'You Can Find Me on Page 4,' and makes love to a shy Englishman, and watchs unwearying as the Nazi's finally destroy a culture too Bacchanalian to save itself.

Finzi-Contini and Cabaret: studies in decadence

Just prior to and during World War II, some six million Jews were slaughtered in Germany, Italy and the countries they conquered. As long as there are men and women of conscience, this tragedy will be both deplored and examined, as it is in similar, but diverse ways by two recent films, Cabaret and The Garden of the Finzi-Contini. Cabaret is a series of night-club (or cabaret) acts, set in the Berlin of the 1920's. They are held together by the story of their central figure, a young American girl dedicated to the preservation of "divine decadence." She meets...