



James Roark

Singer Rick Nelson

"A polite rebuff to rock and roll nostalgia"

Today's New Rock Crooners

By JOEL VANCE

OVER the last few years a type of rock figure has appeared whose roots go far deeper than those of rock. Most often he or she is described as the "singer-songwriter," the "balladeer," "minstrel," or "folk-rocker."

But these people—among them James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon, Cat Stevens, Rick Nelson, Rod Stewart, Bill Withers, Neil Young, Neil Diamond and, yes, Barbra Streisand—belong not so much to rock and roll as to the age-old tradition of the "star." Being stars, they are this decade's (and the last decade's) version of Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Helen Morgan and Billie Holiday.

The attitude of the audience toward all such artists is the same, despite the difference in decades, lifestyles, music and personalities. Those who thrilled to, say, Henry Burr singing "Old Pal Why Don't You Answer Me?" in 1919, sighed later when Crosby sang "When the Blue of the Night Meets the Gold of the Day." Racing through the years, we can see that Frank Sinatra singing any of his classics, Presley singing

"Hound Dog," James Taylor singing "Fire and Rain," Joni Mitchell singing "Both Sides Now" (who would she have been years ago—Ruth Etting? Helen Forrest?) or Cat Stevens singing "Morning Has Broken" produce the same effect on the audience: the singer is singing to me in a personal way; the singer knows my life and I know his; the singer knows the times I live in; I wanna hug him/her till he/she squeaks.

The outstanding difference of today's "new crooners" is that the times we live in are so crowded with present and future shock that the audience has only a limited amount of time or attention to devote to whatever message a given singer is sending out. Many singers are extremely related to today's needs, wants and confusions, but these needs change so often that the relatedness becomes—er, um—perhaps too related to its own moment. "Its own moment" may be three months of 1971, six months of 1974, etc. It will be enough 30 or 50 years from now, to say "Sinatra" to describe a whole artistic world and time. But will it be sufficient

Continued on next page

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Continued from Page 36

to say, even 10 years from now, "Mitchell," "Nelson," "Stevens," "Stewart" and embody the same idea?

In lieu of agreeing to meet back here 10 years hence to compare notes, here is what some of the nominated names have been doing lately.

After a year's time between albums, James Taylor, the shy and wounded composer of the stunning "Fire And Rain," has reappeared with a fine new album *One Man Dog* (Warner Brothers BS 2660). A short time ago, Taylor married Carly Simon, a statuesque and penetrating singer of songs about what women don't want or need. Her new album, smooth and professional, is *No Secrets* (Elektra EKS 75049). Rick Nelson, writhing in frustration for at least 10 years over a teen-rock past he neither liked nor needed, has finally had a substantial hit, "Garden Party," a polite rebuff to the limited, but popular, concept of rock and roll nostalgia. His new album (Decca DL 7-5391), titled after the single, proves, as have his last few albums, that he really does have talent: he is a much more flexible singer these days than in the past and quite a commendable guitarist.

Both Cat Stevens in *Catch Bull At Four* (A & M 4365) and Kris Kristofferson in *Jesus Was A Capricorn* (Monument 31909) continue to delight their fans and puzzle their non-fans. Stevens seems to be after something but it



Sam Slogel

Singer Barbra Streisand

"Submitting her great, wild talent to the disciplines of pop"

is never quite clear what he jumps on several musical style-horses and gallops off in all directions, singing Excelsior or Te Deum lyrics in an intense, befuddling voice. Kristofferson's musical persona seems to be that of a man, usually a sexy hobo, who understands given situations—especially with women—but cannot relate them to the world, outside of saying, "Sure is a funny/crazy/down [choose adjective] world, ain't it?"

Rod Stewart, the hoarse-voiced singer of what seem to be English small-town scene songs (this is roughly comparable to a very talented performer singing songs of what really goes on in Pittsburgh), continues to fascinate with *Never A Dull Moment* (Mercury SRM 1-646). A thorough musician, Stewart consciously uses his voice as an instrument of the band backing him; this makes his work interesting and powerful, in selected doses. Joni Mitchell, whose best-known song is "Both Sides Now," made famous by Judy Collins, continues her successful balancing act of self-introspection without self-pity—writing some fine songs in the process—in *For The Roses* (Asylum SD 5057). Do not overlook Steve Goodman (Buddah BDS 5096), one of the most powerful, poignant and puckish songwriters to appear in the whole folk-rock era.

Neil Young's *Journey Through The Past* (Reprise 2XS 6480) is another example of his brilliant and elusive talent. He is a poet whose

artistry is such that although he speaks in his own language, some kind of message comes through without translation or footnotes. But Neil Diamond's *Moods* (Uni 93136) is just the opposite; he is the typical Brooklyn boy fired by ambition who yearns to make it big by writing hummable tunes—which he has.

Bill Withers and Barbra Streisand are relative newcomers to this scene. Both are extremely independent talents. As a potent Broadway personality, Streisand had already been placed by an adoring public in the Hall of Immortals. Yet her recording of "Stoney End" about two years ago, in which she deliberately went for the pop sound, is probably her most successful effort, artistically and commercially. On this album she willingly submitted her great, wild talent to the disciplines of pop and now she seems to have found her real home, despite her torchy theatrical success. Her new album is *Live At The Forum* (Columbia KC 31760) on which you can hear her style and her audience, both of which are manipulable.

Bill Withers is, in his own way, even more remarkable. He is black, but in a time when many black performers find it easier and more prestigious to emphasize their blackness rather than their talent, Withers is a true individual. He goes his own way. Without hammering on his ethnic background, Withers writes and sings simple, direct songs which have worldwide appeal. In addition, he is a charming per-

sonality who inspires good fellowship along with fingersnapping. Withers is true to himself and true to everybody else. His current album is *Still Bill* (Sussex SXBS 7014).

There probably never has been a time when music and the public were so close together emotionally, and when there is as much diversity in music as there is in public taste, needs and wants. Perhaps this decade will not produce another Sinatra, but considering our delicate and tentative emotions today, perhaps that is as it should be. Anyway, that's the way it is.



Tony Esparaza

Bill Withers

"Inspires good fellowship along with fingersnapping"