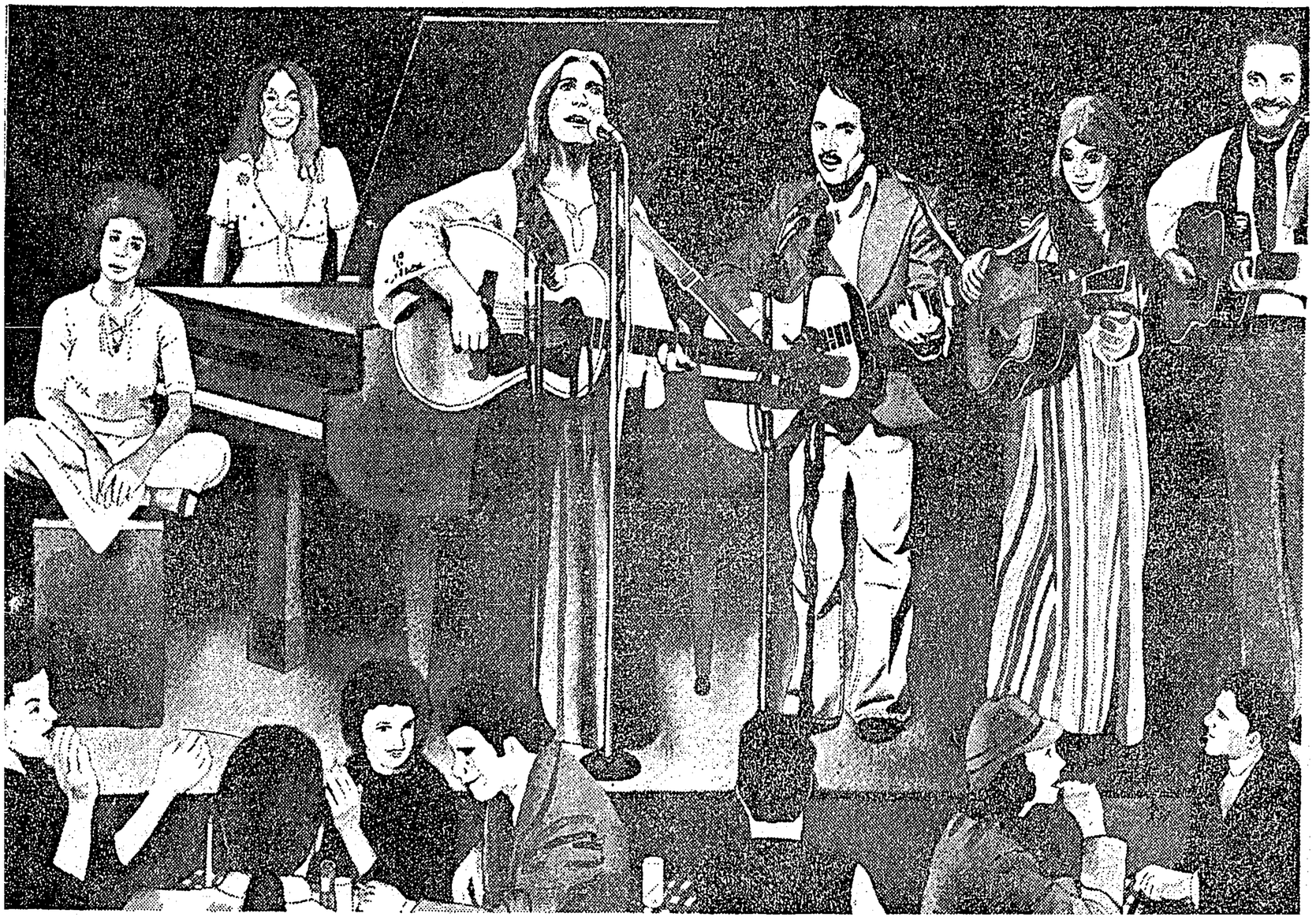
Yesterday's Folkies Are Today's Cabaret Singers



Drawing by Katrina Taylor

Ian, Muldaur, Collins, Simon, Melanie, Mitchell—"continuity of music beneath vagaries of fashion"

By JOHN ROCKWELL

Remember the folkies in their heyday a decade ago? Those earnest women in long dresses with straight long hair and no make-up, and their casually but neatly attired men, all strumming guitars and singing square, unornamented songs about politics and lost loves?

Think now of the typical New York cabaret: a stool, a lone spotlight dramatically isolating a somber, theatrical singer, whose songs deal with sophisticated, adult concerns in a musical idiom that derives from Edith Piaf and Kurt Weill.

These are two types of music that have normally been considered polar opposites, perhaps even the ultimate musical symbols of 1960's: sincerity versus 1970's cynicism. Yet more and more these days, one is struck by the number of former folkies who have either become cabaret artists or have adapted significant elements of that sensibility into their music.

Think about Janis Ian, Joni Mitchell, Maria Muldaur, Paul Simon, Melanie, Phoebe Snow, Judy Collins, Odetta, Chad Mitchell, Laura Nyro, Garland Jeffries and even Bruce Springsteen. All of them, in one way or another, have come from a folk background (broadly considered) and now include elements of cabaret, Broadway or adult pop (which overlap in style and repertory) in their songs.

What does this mean? How could folk artists, who were generally thought of as politically committed, all-American, rural and heterosexual, suddenly flourish in so seemingly foreign an environment? For the cabaret style's image is detached, European-oriented, intensely urban and homosexual in its sensibility and appeal.

The answers are that first, the transition hasn't been so abrupt as one might first think, and second, that maybe folk revivalism and cabaret singing aren't such radical opposites as their images might suggest.

The 60's folk revival wasn't "real" folk music, which for the purposes of this discussion is music based with some directness on oral traditions that grew up mostly in rural areas of this country and Great Britain.

The folk revival took that tradition and polished it into a commercial package. This wasn't just a question of clean jeans and haircuts; it meant that the music itself was arranged and tailored into white-bread form, mixing in a good dosage of the arranging techniques of Tin Pan Alley that had been pushed out of the main arena of pop

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Yesterday's Folkies

music by rock and roll.

The cabaret repertory today is a highly diverse one. It blends numbers from pop music's past (sometimes camped up and sometimes sung straight), jazz singing, bits of British music hall, continental cabaret ballads, new songs written in any of those idioms and even folk music. All of this tends to be performed in a rather more highly inflected, dramatic style of emoting than folk and rock fans are used to, but even that isn't an invariable rule.

So one sees that folk and cabaret do not, as one might have first thought, represent opposite poles of naturalness and arch artificiality. The folk-revivalists artificialized the roots of folk in a similar way that the mannerisms of the present-day Broadway-cabaret style of singing, often mask a heartful directness of expression.

Both folk and cabaret can best be considered as part of the same reaction against the dominant pop music of the past 20 years. The singers and the audiences in both folk and cabaret are people who resent the bludgeoning of music by the wattage of electric amplification and the direct crudeness of most rock and roll. The 60's folkies represented a prolongation of older pop styles against the onslaught of American and then British rock. And the 70's cabaret singers are similarly repositories of clever lyrics, subtle melodies and delicate inflections in the miasma of heavy-metal rock and disco that floods the airwaves.

When one looks more closely at some of the artists that are relevant here, one naturally perceives differences among them. Take Judy Collins and Chad Mitchell, for instance. Miss Collins had a hit recently in "Send in the Clowns," the Stephen Sondheim song. Yet she is still, essentially the same artist she's always been, since she's been including Broadway and cabaret tunes on her albums and in her stage shows for years. Mitchell, who is still best remembered today as the man John Denver replaced in the Chad Mitchell Trio over a decade ago, has had his ups and downs in his personal life, what with a conviction for possession of 400 pounds of marijuana. But even before his troubles, in the late 60's, he had moved forthrightly in the direction of cabaret with songs by and reminiscent of Jacques Brel peppering hisact.

Janis Ian and Melanie—who were often paired in people's minds in the late 60's—have followed a more evolutionary path. After youthful successes in a polished folk soft-rock idiom, they reappeared with songs that owe an overt debt to the European continent in complexity of structure, depth of themes and even actual instrumental timbres. Similar, less fully developed transitions can be perceived on the club circuit with Odetta and Garland Jeffries, and even Laura Nyro, who sticks closer to her soul roots than the others, creeps sometimes into a jazzish-cabaret mode on her latest album.

There is an analogous Los Angeles school. The best-known example is Joni Mitchell, who began as a guitar-strumming folkie in Greenwich Village and who has become a brittle, sophisticated purveyor of adult songs with a clever, jazzlike backing. Dory Previn, who just did a one-night stand at the Ballroom, is another instance of modern-day cabaret stylization, although her songs have always been so personal and knotty as to defy the label of "folk."

Maria Muldaur, who started out in Cambridge on the folkish jug-band circuit, is now based in Los Angeles and has worked out her own, highly eclectic idiom that includes jazzy-cabaret arrangements principally under the aegis of that wonderful jazzman, Benny Carter.

A special niche must be reserved for artists who worked in a folk-blues style and wound up with strong cabaret overtones. When this listener first heard Phoebe Snow, she still called herself Phoebe Laub and was belting out a not particularly distinctive brand of blues (maybe it *was* distinctive; this observer recalls otherwise, but then he has something of a prejudice against young white people singing the blues). Now she has emerged into stardom with her own variant of old jazz and adult-pop idioms.

With Bruce Springsteen, the connection to the folk-cabaret polarity grows a little tenuous, since Springsteen is clearly a rock-and-roller. But when he first emerged, he was a guitar-strumming electric folkie in the Bob Dylan mode. And his music has always been marked by a rhetorical, ornate quality very close to Broadway musicals. It's so marked that he offends some rockers with his very theatricality. But it seems clear that he will steadily broaden his style to include aspects of music formerly considered anathema to rock.

Probably the most telling instance of all, however, is Paul Simon. Simon's music has seemed needlessly slick and artificial, but perhaps that's because we've been considering him in an improper context. The music of Simon and Garfunkel fit into the category of folk-revival or folk-rock, but it really had very little to do with the raw intensity of people like Dylan. Instead, Simon was writing songs that in a previous generation would have headed straight for Broadway, and from there into people's living rooms via radio.

In his recent music he's made that direction completely clear, and when his music is perceived not as folk but as latter-day adult pop, the genuine skill and freshness of it become more and more apparent.

Once one thinks of Simon, one can also consider a whole genre of vaguely folkish soft-rocking singer-songwriters from a similar prospective. People like Gordon Lightfoot, Harry Chapin, Billy Joel, Donovan, Garfunkel, Cat Stevens, Rod McKuen and, more recently, Mirabai and David Forman. Whatever their differences of talent and taste, they are making music that answers the same needs that 30's pop, the folk revival, Broadway and modern-day cabaret also answer—for tuneful music with thought-provoking lyrics.

None of this will satisfy the pure-folk and rock loyalists, who will dismiss this music as calculated, mannered and shallow. To them, one can only suggest that there is more than one way to write music, and that to condemn practitioners of a certain style for not living up to the demands of a totally foreign style is simply misguided.

At their best, the hybrid folk-cabaret artists combine the strengths of both styles. Chad Mitchell's really quite superb performances at the Ballroom stick in the memory. Here was a man who miraculously managed to make the much abused artifice of the continental cabaret tradition sound direct and sincere, and the sometimes naive homilies of folk music seem full of subtle wisdom. It was a lovely experience to hear, and it gave one faith in the underlying continuities of music, beneath all the feistily debated vagaries of fashion. ■

A short list of records discussed in this article: JUDY COLLINS: Judith, Elektra 7E-1032. JANIS IAN: Between the Lines, Columbia PC-33394; Aftertones, Columbia PC-33919. MELANIE: Photograph, Atlantic SD 18190. JONI MITCHELL: Court and Spark, Asylum 1001. MARIA MULDAUR: Waitress in a Donut Shop, Warner Brothers MS 2194. PAUL SIMON: *Still Crazy After All These Years*, Columbia PC-33540. BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: Born to Run, Columbia PC-33795.

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