

Singer-Songwriters Are Making a Comeback

*Developing Trend Indicated
at the Bitter End by Jerry
Walker and Joni Mitchell*

By ROBERT SHELTON

After two years of the dominance of electric pop groups, the singer-songwriter with the pre-Edison guitar is making a comeback.

Trends in Greenwich Village night haunts are mercurial, but all indications are that a return to folk-style performances is well on the way.

The Bitter End, long on a heavy rock diet, is presenting two of the most interesting folk-oriented talents to emerge since Arlo Guthrie and Janis Ian were strumming in the Village two years ago.

The Gaslight, long an incubator for folk talent, has reopened on Macdougall Street. Gerde's Folk City is pondering a move to the West Village while two former centers of electric pop, the Night Owl and Generation, remain closed.

Changing Tastes

Part of the reason for the drift from the band to the single performer or small group is economics. The cost of booking an electric band can be prohibitive. Part of the change, however, is the cyclical nature of pop taste, indicating the high-frequency rock 'n' roar may have reached its zenith.

The two talented newcomers at the Bitter End, Joni Mitchell and Jerry Jeff Walker, are saying a lot through understatement. Since one is allied to the chansonnier tradition and the other to sophisticated country music, they are only loosely to be considered as folk singers.

Mr. Walker is the embodiment of the trend toward the solo performer. He recently left the rock group he helped form, Circus Maximus, after some philosophical differences over direction in music.

He veers toward a hip-country style, folkish modern Nashville in a manner that recalls Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan,



Joni Mitchell



Jerry Jeff Walker

Roger Miller and any other rural rambler-bumbler with a funny hat, a beat-up guitar and a head full of lyrics.

At 26, Mr. Walker is sitting on a potential hit recording, his own "Mr. Bojangles," an enticing musical portrait of a street dancer he met some years ago in a New Orleans jailhouse. The song got an underground buildup on Bob Fass's taste-making WBAI show and is now being heavily touted.

A native of Oneonta, N. Y., he has done a lot of road work, notably around New Orleans and Texas. His singing is gentle and introspective, with an unforced lilt that draws you into his cosmos.

About 'Little People'

He occasionally speaks out in his lyrics on "pettiness, war, religion and social irritations," but mostly he writes about "little people."

If Mr. Walker seems destined for a broad audience, Miss Mitchell seems certain to gain a collegiate-intellectual following.

A 24-year-old Canadian with long blond hair, high cheekbones and a fine voice, she writes like a poet and strums like the devil. Using a lot of unusual and experimental guitar tunings, she heightens her moody songs with doleful accompaniments.

Her influences are clearly Judy Collins and Buffy Sainte-Marie in vocalizing, Eric Anderson and Tom Rush in guitar work, and Leonard Cohen and the French and Canadian chansonnier school in lyrics.

Her "That Song About the Midway" is a resetting of the melody of Dylan's "Baby Blue," but she has a body of finely wrought songs that are undoubtedly going to be called "Joni Mitchell songs."

Word of her seeped around first through recordings of her songs by other performers. She has worked for years to build a reputation in Canada and on the West Coast. She writes as much for the stage as for the page, frequently working poems into songs. Her "Circle Game" and "Both Sides Now" are perhaps her strongest compositions to date, foreshadowing a strong future as a writer.

Neither Mr. Walker nor Miss Mitchell are focused on protest, but she did say she was compelled, after the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to write "four or five songs about the event." As with Mr. Walker, love and personal themes are foremost in her mind.

Both singers are bringing a bit of philosophic calm in pop song to the forefront again.