

Growing old — and maudlin — in the folk world

BY ROBERT MARTIN

BOB DYLAN, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon and Gordon Lightfoot have some things in common besides the fact that they have all put out new albums within the last month. For one thing, they all used to be folk singers. Not one of them could be called that now without doing severe damage to the traditional concept of the folk singer as one person with one instrument. It's time to change the definition.

Another thing they have in common, on these new albums at least, is the recognition that they are growing old. Dylan, Mitchell and Lightfoot are over that arbitrary line of 30 while Simon, the baby of the group, is pushing the mark at 29. Consequently, we find Dylan praying for his five children in *Forever Young*. Lightfoot, father of two, adds his wish for the young in *Too Late for Praying*. Miss Simon is still young enough herself to remember her own childhood and recalls it in *Older Sister and Grownup*. Miss Mitchell calls herself *Trouble Child*. Can retirement and memoirs be far behind?

Joni Mitchell will be in town tomorrow for her first concert here in years. *Court and Spark* (Asylum 7E-1001), her latest album, is certainly her best since her first folk efforts, *Joni Mitchell and Clouds*, and, unless you're a folk purist, it is her best ever.

Miss Mitchell started off writing extremely structured songs—it's typical of artists working in the folk idiom—but as she grew and became looser in her lyric structure, her music began to fall apart. The worst example of this is her last album, *From the Roses* which is poetically interesting but musically dull.

On *Court and Spark* she has amalgamated lyrics and music into a beautiful balance. This is especially true of the second side, six numbers flawless in terms of structure, variety, subject matter and above all, musicality.

Much of the execution of this new positive feeling was the work of Tom Scott, a brilliant woodwind and reed man and leader of a group called the L.A. Express. He was around for Miss Mitchell's last album but this time he brought his new band along and the results are sparkling. The band will do its own set tomorrow and then back up Miss Mitchell in her Massey Hall concert.

Court and Spark is the work of a mature woman. Miss Mitchell is recapitulating many of the themes that have appeared on *For the Roses* and earlier albums. *Falling in Love* (Help



Bob Dylan and Gordon Lightfoot together at Mariposa Festival in 1972.

Me), love spoiled by circumstances (*Court and Spark*), satisfying a lover (*The Same Situation*), being between lovers (*Just Like this Train*), all these themes have occurred before in her work. But now there is a sense of greater emotional control that has resulted in greater artistic control.

Planet Waves (Asylum 7E-1003) is Bob Dylan's first full album of original material since *New Morning* was released in October, 1970. During the interim three Dylan albums were released but they contained only three new songs.

That should make the release of *Planet Waves* a major event but it depends on what you're looking for. Fans who are willing to collect eighth-generation bootleg tapes of Dylan singing into a cheap cassette in somebody's basement will buy it regardless. Others will buy it because of the publicity created by Dylan's current tour.

But then there are those who will buy *Planet Waves* for the music. They may be disappointed.

Now that he's rich, happily married and over 30, his songs are smug and self-righteous. The worst offender in this category is *Forever Young*, a prayer for his children that is rife with cliché, such as "May you build a ladder to the stars, and climb up every rung," or, "May your hands always be busy, May your feet always be swift." He sounds like a high school teacher or a track coach.

This song is part of Dylan's turning his back on his youth. In *Wedding*

Song, he affirms his love of his wife with the lines that constitute the philosophical core of the album, "It's never been my duty to remake the world at large, nor is it my intention to sound the battle charge." In *Something There Is About You* he appears reconciled to his departed youth enough to mention for the first time in song that he was raised in Minnesota rather than in the wild west as he previously claimed.

The Band is present on the album but its presence for the most part has been wasted. Despite its loose, almost slaphappy arrangements, The Band is a group that records slowly and with care. *Planet Waves* was recorded in three days and The Band wasn't given a chance to provide any more inventive backup than could have been supplied by Nashville sessionmen.

Production values are nil and, in the name of casualness, extraneous studio noises have crept in and been allowed to stay. Because the Band hasn't been allowed a chance to embellish properly, many of the most effective cuts are those with the simplest arrangements.

The other effective number is *Wedding Song* which has Dylan alone playing guitar and harmonica. It sounds like the Dylan of 1962 musically but the sentiment is years older. Dylan is a textbook example of the artist who produces brilliant work under adverse conditions but collapses into mediocrity when times improve.

Marriage certainly has changed Carly Simon from the romantic but tough minded woman of last year's *No Secrets* album. Her latest, *Hecate* (Elektra 7E-1002), is a poem to togetherness and her husband, James Taylor. Seven of the 11 songs (*Hecate*, the title tune, is basically instrumental) are celebrations of their relationship. Titles like *Safe and Sound*, *Mind on My Mind* and *Forever My Love* are self-explanatory.

Others, like *Just Not True*, are cry in their pretended criticism that dissolve into "softness in my eyes". *Misfit*, with its invitation to stay home nights and watch the television is a far cry from Taylor's *Night Owl* which Miss Simon included on her pre-marriage album.

Musically, the new album is quite similar to Miss Simon's last effort, featuring her characteristic swooping vocal style and the patented swaying strings of arranger Paul Buckmaster. There's no great hit single on it like *You're So Vain*, now up for a Grammy Award. The best bit is the old (1969) Inez Fuzz number, *Mockingbird*. It features husband Taylor on vocals with Dr. John and Robbie Robertson among the list of inviters on the session.

If Gordon Lightfoot hasn't broken any new ground in his last three or four albums, he has at least achieved a high level of artistic consistency. His latest effort, *Sundown* (Reprise MS 2177) adds impressively to that record. The familiar Lightfoot themes recur: going down the road in *Carefree Highway*, a special girl in *Sundown*, the sea in *High and Dry*. Lightfoot seems able to play endless variations on these ideas and still come up with interesting and successful songs.

Lightfoot first tried using string sections on the album *Did She Mention My Name?* and the results then were mixed. The same is true of *Sundown* on which strings are used in five of the 10 songs. They only work on one cut, *The Watchman's Gone*, because they are used very sparingly and the lyric is extremely forceful. On the other cuts the strings swamp the songs, turning Lightfoot's romanticism into soggy sentimentality.

It's obvious why Lightfoot uses strings. He needs the variety. But he achieves much better effects with instruments like Jack Zaza's recorder and English horn on *Circle of Steel* or Milt Holland's percussion work on *Somewhere U.S.A.* Also prominent on five cuts on this record is John Stockfish, Lightfoot's former bassist, who hasn't recorded with him since *Back Here on Earth*.