



TV & Radio
Patrick Scott

Mama Cass must be trying to put us on

A commentator called Richard Flohill, who becomes so transported by Mama Cass Elliot that he cannot calm himself long enough to spell her name right, was theorizing the other day that her television special this week signalled a turning-point in North American culture.

"... the new music," this Flohill rhapsodized, "is making the television screen. One by one, the long-haired beautiful people . . . are getting their talents across into all the straight living rooms in North America. People who know where music is at these days will wait for her (Mama Cass') singing . . ."

And so it came to pass this week that Mama Cass Elliot opened her where-it's-at special with a song composed in 1932 (Dream A Little Dream Of Me, her sole hit recording), closed it with one written in 1936 (I Can Dream, Can't I? on which she reaffirmed that she is no Patti Andrews, which is her misfortune, not Miss Andrews'), and in between joined two of her guests, Joni Mitchell and Mary Travers, to simulate a vocal trio the likes of which, for pure traumatic effect,

has not been seen or heard in public since the historic stroke of sadism that prompted Arthur Godfrey to unleash the, you should pardon the expression, McGuire Sisters on his unsuspecting viewers.

Somebody, somewhere, is trying to put us on.

Let's start with Mama Cass herself. She is not especially offensive if you don't watch her while she sings, but on the other hand she is not exactly a songbird from heaven, either. Her voice is mildly appealing by today's accepted standards, but it only remains appealing for as long as she manages to keep it in key, which is fleetingly at best.

In fact, let's come right out and face it: The largest part of her commercial appeal, both figuratively and literally, is her sheer physical bulk. She is a freak, a female Tiny Tim (or vice versa), but even this is nothing new: Kate Smith was a bigger girl and a bigger star (as well as a much better singer) 30 years ago; Ella Fitzgerald is a bigger girl and a bigger star (and an incomparably better singer) right now.

But for the fact that the physical grotesque is in just now (why



MAMA CASS ELLIOT
A female Tiny Tim

else is it invariably the uglies who insist on disrobing in public?), Mama Cass' only conceivable niche in showbusiness would be as the

Fat Lady in a circus. This is not a kind thing to say, and it is true that beauty is more than skin-deep, but it also is true that as either a singer or a looker Mama Cass Elliot is no Lurlean Hunter. And, in any event, no tears should be shed for performers who capitalize avariciously on their own physical deformities. In this respect Mama Cass is no threat to Sammy Davis, the all-time champ, but there can be no other explanation for the fact that the majority of the camera angles on her special this week—from the rear and slightly above—seemed calculated to make her resemble a mushroom.

Or you could take Joni Mitchell (better you than I). Another of today's beautiful people, Miss Mitchell epitomizes the current confusion of mediocrity with merit: She is the Sandy Dennis of singers, all mouth and no talent, but because she writes her own stuff—presumably in crayon—it is presumed by the pseudo-intellectuals who constitute today's pop-music audience to possess sociological significance; the facts that she sings it just off one key (in the most undernourished voice since the halcyon days of Wee Bonnie Baker)

and accompanies herself on the guitar just off another apparently are irrelevant. For beautiful people, give me Lena Horne singing Cole Porter and put your Joni Mitchells back behind the barn.

It is no secret, of course, that Mama Cass' special was designed to test the climate for her own weekly series, which is why ABC saw fit to toss in Buddy Hackett in order to broaden its appeal beyond that of the beautiful people for their definitive camp following. Hackett can be a funny man at times, but his "serious" duet with Mama Cass this week will not cause Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald to palpitate in their graves (though it conceivably could have a similar effect on Bob Burns and Judy Canova).

As a special, the show had its moments—most notably those provided by Miss Travers, who at least has some sex in her voice (as well as a hint of the makings of a worthwhile jazz singer); but unless television can contrive a means of creating a series for Mama Cass in which she would be heard but not seen, Doris Day looks good for at least another season.