

JANIS IAN/ PHIL OCHS SURVIVAL IN ROCK

By William Dart

*Stars, they come and go
They come fast or slow
They go like the last light
of the sun, all in a blaze
and all you see is glory
But those who've seen it all
they live their lives
in sad cafes and music halls
we always have a story.*

Janis Ian on the vagaries of Stardom. Some make it whilst others, unfortunately or fortunately as the case may be, don't. Five years or so after *Time* did a feature article on James Taylor and his various brothers and sister, we really wonder what the fuss was all about. The rise and subsequent decline in the fortunes of Cat Stevens and Marc Bolan appears mildly meteoric. Bowie seems to be sustaining his career by carefully altering his image as each new album comes out. Survival is the name of the game and it is the prime concern of every artist in the rock industry.

When Phil Ochs hung himself in April last year, it was a tragic end to a career that in many ways stopped before it really began. Ochs was an artist seriously out of limbo with the industry he needed to promote his work. And, considering the highly capitalist nature of the record industry and the unflinching left-wing philosophies of Ochs, it was a situation roughly comparable to Chairman Mao's thoughts being published in Boston or *Mein Kampf* in Tel Aviv. An untenable situation in anything but a Randy Newman song.

Ochs started his career in the mid-sixties writing 'protest' songs such as "I Ain't Marching Any More" and "There But For Fortune" which he sang with a straightforward guitar accompaniment. No frills, just a good tune and some fairly hard-hitting lyrics — this was the pattern for all of the songs in his first three Elektra albums. In the late sixties, however, many of the American songwriters realised that a voice, guitar and socially conscientious lyrics were not enough for the new aesthetic. Inspired by the Joshua Rifkin-Judy Collins alliance in the latter's *In My Life* album, Tom Paxton

started using colorful arrangements by David Horovitz and Phil Ochs, now on a new label, wrote some of his most powerful songs.

Ochs' first A&M album, *Pleasures of the Harbour* was released in New Zealand in 1972 as a belated follow-up to Ochs' local University tour. In this album he uses extremely elaborate arrangements from the ironically honky-tonk band in "Outside Of A Small Circle of Friends" to the high point of the album, an eight minute eulogy on the death of President Kennedy called "Crucifixion" which uses an effective part-instrumental, part-electronic accompaniment by Joseph Byrd. The other long narrative track, "The Party" shows a High Society party being invaded and brutally terminated by a gang of toughs. This song is all played against a relentless cocktail piano accompaniment which throws snatches of such hardy perennials as "As Time Goes By" in between the verses.

Ochs continued this style in his next two albums but his audiences were decreasing. As if his long narrative songs were not enough, his harsh criticism of America at a time when Dylan himself had opted for gemütlich Nashville stylings, must have been a little unsettling for many. In "The Harder They Fall" he shows the American nightmare in nursery rhyme terms:

*Mother Goose is on the loose,
Stealing lines from Lenny Bruce.
Drinking booze and killing
Jews.*

His last album was a projected double album, but A&M only released one half of it in the States. The rejected half was a live album called *Gunfight at Carnegie Hall* and was recorded at Ochs' disastrous attempt at a populist comeback, gold lame suit and all. The album only saw the shop shelves in Canada and Europe.

The other half of this double set, titled *Phil Ochs' Greatest Hits* was an album of new material ironically captioned "50 Phil Ochs Fans Can't Be Wrong". This is a stunning album with a considerable range of material from hard-core country and western ("Gas Station Woman") to Ochs' later more mandarin style ("Bach, Beethoven Mozart and Me"). Some of the songs are rather poignant in retrospect such as "Chords of Fame" or "No More Songs" which takes a few side-swipes at Dylan and Baez. Unfettered by Dylan's massive fortune and mana, Ochs did not at any time compromise his own beliefs, but perhaps lacked the ultimate moral strength to carry on his struggle.

Another case of interest is Janis Ian who had a regular *success d'estime* and *d'argent* at the age of 15 with her single "Society's Child". Not only did this song punch parents in the guts and preach for racial equality, but Lenny Bernstein himself

promoted the song and the singer all over the CBS television network. Ian's first four albums however showed an alarming downward spiral in her popularity with fans. This was rather ironic because she was refining her craft both musically and lyrically in these albums. And even when she was trying a comeback in 1970 with an attractive new album, *Present Company* her audiences at concerts still only wanted to hear "Society's Child" and other juvenalia.

This created a difficult situation. As an artist, you can't still be castigating Daddy and Mummy in song at the age of 90 unless you're Dory Previn; and yet Janis Ian's audiences were reluctant to let their idol extend herself as a writer. This creator — audience tension created a certain cynicism in Ian's work, and her songs started to harp on the subjects of "stardom", the world of the performer and his relationship with his audience. In her fourth album, *Who Really Cares* she is deliberately writing songs with such familiar titles as "Galveston" and "Snowbird", and flaunting her musical virtuosity by using every style from Motown to a French cafe waltz. Short of certified cases such as Wild Man Fischer, it is one of the closest things to genuine schizophrenia on vinyl.

A self-enforced two year exile from the recording industry, supposedly

'to study songwriting' ended with Ian's "Jesse" being a hit for Roberta Flack. Janis Ian's first album after her 'retirement' was *Stars* and had a virtuoso eight minute title track that offered a rather resigned view of the ups and downs of the popularity business.

However, in these recent albums (*Stars*, *Between the Lines*, *Aftertones* and *Miracle Row*) Ian has certainly 'learnt' the craft of songwriting, if by that we mean the ability to create neat and rather pat little songs on 'emotionally meaningful' subjects. In this matter she seems to be approaching the skill of Paul Simon himself. The record sleeves of *Aftertones* and *Miracle Row* offer a visual complement to her songwriting approach. The first has a cautious Janis Ian looking through a broken window, lined by various 'significant' books, and the latter features Ian and her musicians on a plush carpet on the roof of a New York building.

Phil Ochs and Janis Ian are the two sides of the coin of success. The paradox is that in failing Phil Ochs has succeeded, whereas Janis Ian's recent success may ultimately be construed as a failure. As Ochs advises in his song, "Chords of Fame"

*So play the chords of Love, my friend
Play the chords of pain
If you want to keep your song
Don't play the chords of Fame.*

Hemmingsen's Column

Murray McNab Trio . . . at the Vacation Hotel. Mike Walsh has taken Frank Gibson's place in the drum chair at the Vacation Hotel. Murray and Frank have worked together for many years and Frank will be sadly missed on the Auckland scene, particularly 'Dr Tree'. He recently left for London and we hope to have more news about his soom. All the best in your new job Mike.

Salty Dogg . . . have recently reformed and are at this stage touring New Zealand getting their 'new sound' together. Members are: Martin Winch — guitar, Bob Jackson — bass, Harril Mulaney — keyboards, Graham Chapman — vocals and Laurie Bently — drums.

They have renewed their contract with EMI and we look forward to a new album soon.

Mandalay, Auckland . . . a new group formed by bass guitarist **Russell Good**. Now working two nights at the Mandalay.

Ian Fraser — drums, Nigel Lee — guitar, Graham Sinclair — keyboards and Colin Hemmingsen — reeds.

Russell is a fairly recent addition to the Auckland musical scene and we hope to hear a lot more from him.

El Matador, Auckland . . . Brian Henderson has made a couple of changes to his long established and well known **El Matador Trio** with Denny Boreham on bass and Daryl Pettus (an American who hasn't been in New Zealand too long) on drums, and Brian Henderson himself, of course, on keyboards. It's good to hear some modern sounds coming from one of Auckland's leading restaurants.

Riff Raff . . . Auckland rock group is splitting in two — that is they'll soon have two names. One for their commercial work, and one for their 'original material' group which will be doing concerts. There have also been some personnel changes:

Peter Moore — guitar, Tim Smysar — vocals and some alto, Andy Moore — bass, Ken Hickson — drums and Dave Hickson — reeds.

At this stage they are in the process of changing keyboard players.

This is a new column, and if anybody has any items of interest please contact Colin Hemmingsen, c/- Box 5689, Auckland.

