

Woadside

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Big Sur

Folk Festival

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by John Davis

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The fifth annual Big Sur Folk Festival took place this weekend under warm skies at the Esalen Institute with the featured performers Joan Baez, Mama Cass Elliot, Arlo Guthrie and the Charles River Valley Boys.

It would be hard to imagine a better location for the Festival than this beautiful setting 16 miles south of Big Sur. The Esalen Institute is normally used for awareness seminars and the like and has beautiful grounds situated on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The audience which numbered around 5,000 each day, sat on the lawn in front of the pool with the performers on the far side of the pool and the Pacific Ocean as a backdrop.

It was a fitting weekend for the Festival, for on Saturday morning (Sept. 7) before the festival opened Mimi Farina was married to Mylan Melvin; in a wedding the established press chose to describe as a "hippie" wedding. Many performers in the folk field were present for the wedding and stayed over for the Festival. The whole Festival was dedicated to Mimi. Two of the unexpected performers were Mama Cass Elliot and John Hartford. Also a surprise was Joni Mitchell who arrived in the back of a Volkswagen bus late Friday night.

The Festival was scheduled to start at 2:00 P.M. on Saturday and I arrived with wife and three kids about 12:30 P.M. By then, cars were already parked about one mile each side of the Institute on Coast Highway 1. I had to leave my German Shepherd in the car, but outside of that we had no problems getting in. As we went in, we were stamped "Big Sur" in red so we could leave and return as we liked.

It was great to see people with "Big Sur" on their foreheads, stomachs, faces, anywhere there was bare skin (there was a lot of that!) One guy has his face stamped alongside his beard, which really looked terrific.

We finally found a space on the lawn and right at 2:00 P.M. the Festival got underway. All the performers opened the show singing "Any Day Now", which turned out to be the theme song for the weekend. Nancy Carlen, who has organized these festivals for the past few years was the Mistress of Ceremonies but did not perform as she had in past years.

The Charles River Valley Boys opened the Festival. They came from Boston, Washington, and San Francisco to perform here at Big Sur. They were great, as always, doing all traditional material. This was the only group on the Festival schedule, which was probably the only real shortcoming of the event. In fact, the overabundance of female artists led Joni Mitchell to christen the show the "Big Sur Ovary Festival."

John Hartford, who had come for the wedding, did "Gentle on My Mind" and a couple of others. It makes you wonder why Glen Campbell got all the credit.

Arlo Guthrie refused to do "Alice's Restaurant," for which I was eternally grateful. Arlo's sick of the song, I'm sick of the song, and besides, you can buy his first album and listen to it all you want. He did try to pacify the audience by doing the "Motorcycle Song." He did some new material which was good, and even did an old Jimmy Rodgers tune. This was the first time I had heard Arlo do any traditional material and it came over well.

A local gal by the name of Rita Gaddy came on next. She has a very pleasant voice and sang some nice things.

Next was the girl I think has more talent in her little finger than most people can acquire in a lifetime; and that's Joni Mitchell. She has an innocence and charm about her that is hard to describe. I don't feel she has had anywhere near the recognition she deserves. She did a couple of new songs and sang some of the ones on her album with just her own guitar accompaniment. She didn't sing "The Circle Game," which was a disappointment to me for she does it better than anyone.

Judy Collins was simply great. She had more backup musicians than I had seen her with before (and the most of anyone at the Festival). She had piano, guitar, and bass accompaniment, plus her own 6- and 12-string guitars. Steven Stills of the



Buffalo Springfield played guitar for her. Judy and Steven seemed to be going together, which may have been the reason for his being at the Festival. She did Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now" ("Clouds") and "Tom Thumb's Blues" and a couple of her own songs. One song was especially beautiful, "My Father's Dreams."

Steven Stills and David Crosby did a set, and then it was intermission time. During intermission photographers were running around taking everybody's picture. Joan Baez had her picture taken holding a baby. She's not even running for a political office, but it was a beautiful picture.

The second half opened with Penny Nichols, a girl who appears in local clubs around Southern California.

Jim Hendricks, who six years ago was part of a singing group known as the Big Three (Cass Elliot, Jim Hendricks, and Tim Rose) was next on the program. It was the first time I had heard Jim (except for the record of the Big Three) and I was very impressed with his style.

Mimi Farina Melvin did a couple of songs. She was joined by Joan Baez and Judy Collins; they really have a nice blend, and should do more things together. (The song they did on the Women's Strike for Peace album - Pete Seeger's "Oh, Had I a Golden Thread" - has probably sold more copies of that album than all the other songs put together.)

Saturday night closed with Joan Baez doing some Dylan songs.

The Festival was not so punctual in starting on Sunday, so some impromptu music started out in the audience which really turned into a gas. One guy was using an empty gallon wine bottle as a jug, and someone else was playing kazoo, plus a couple of guitars. The result was pretty good jug band music.

Finally things on stage got underway with Joan Baez starting off the program. She was joined by the Charles River Valley Boys; she really sounds good with the bluegrass harmony. The Charles River Valley Boys then did a set by themselves and, to satisfy the audience, did one of the songs from their Beatle Country album.

Susan Hoover from New York made an appearance and then Jim Hendricks did a set, backed up by Van Dyke Parks on piano. Mama Cass and Jim Hendricks did a song together, one they wrote back in the Big Three Days.

Joni Mitchell returned and did a new song she had written for piano. Since she hadn't had time to coordinate her singing and piano playing, she did the tune a cappella. What a beautiful voice! The echo from across the canyon had a mesmerizing effect on the audience. Joni was then joined by Mama Cass for a couple of duets.

Next Mark Spoelstra made his only appearance during the Festival. Mark is one of the people responsible for the Big Sur Folk Festival, and were it not for him, Joan Baez, and Nancy Carlen, it would be doubtful whether it would come off.

Judy Collins closed out the first half and opened the second half with Joan Baez. Judy was again at the piano, and she and Joan did a beautiful duet. Arlo Guthrie followed with a set of new songs.

Mimi Farina Melvin and Maria d'Amato Muldaur sang together. Their voices don't really complement each other, but they were later joined by the Charles River Valley Boys, and that part came off pretty good. Maria didn't do any sets by herself or with the CRVB, which I thought was a waste.

Joan and Judy teamed up again and were joined by Joni and Mimi in a tribute to the late Richard Farina, "Pack Up Your Sorrows." Then everybody got together to close the Festival with "Any Day Now." Mama Cass was holding a little baby while doing this last great song, which sort of symbolized the whole weekend.

What really made the Festival for me was the informality. There wasn't any of this super-star business. Kids were running around, dogs were asleep on stage (but mine had to remain in the car). Joan Baez and Cass Elliott carrying babies around, the beautiful simple clothes the gals were wearing, everyone having a ball - it was just a beautiful thing and something to be remembered for a long time.

