

Pickin'

# Roger Kellaway & Joni Mitchell

LEONARD BROWN

I'm notorious in some circles as a freestyle fuckup champ. Thing is, I make stunningly bad choices, and never mind what a shrink would say about that. Once in a while I fool even me — like the other evening, when I went to Donte's in the Valley to see Roger Kellaway. It was also the evening that Joni Mitchell opened her truncated stanza at the Troubadour before an audience which was, according to my spies, like a very large people pudding.

I had a great time at Donte's. The music was surprising — but not because of its excellence. Believe me, you get a better guarantee with Roger Kellaway's music than the one that came with your ears. The surprise was (if I can figure out a way to say this lucidly) not that he did what we expect of him, i.e., the unexpected, but that he did it in such an unexpected way. He's a startling chameleon in his dartings across the polychromatic landscape of music. And what he played was jazz of the post-Parker period, roughly the late 1950's and early 1960's. One of his horn players even sneaked in a quote from "Hothouse," which tells you exactly what was happening, provided you've been next to Bird, on records if not actually over that stretch of the road.

Now this is the same Roger Kellaway who got it on with an

assortment of strings called the "Roger Kellaway Cello Quartet," on his last album but one. And who, on his most recent album, fiercely ambushed the heads of those who expected more amber tranquility. *Center of the Circle* is, as much a physical experience as, say, *Lead Zep* or *Deep Purple*. There seems to be a considerable controversy about this album, possibly because it was so unexpected, and I'd really like a piece of that action if I had arguments to go with my pro-partisanship. I think *Center of the Circle* is great fun, which is shoddy criticism of the weakest kind, but it appears that Roger has moved a few steps beyond my comprehension, as often happens in abstract art, or rather *should* happen.

How do you live with it until you manage to catch up and know it? By sharing space with it, for one thing, and by trusting the artist, for another. This last is important beyond all else, for tempted as I am to improvise a funny fable about a great synergy of brilliant physicists who call themselves collectively the "Roger Kellaway," the fact is that there is just one composer of that name, and he has progressed from where we all were and, I believe, has gotten himself over there where we shortly will be. No trickery, just musical intelligence. So if you trusted him amongst more familiar sounds and sequences, nothing fun-

damental has changed, and you can continue to trust him in those alien distances which are the future of music.

As for sharing space, that is how I think of hearing music which your mind refuses to listen to. Your mind is a curious vessel, more inclined to fill itself than to be filled at certain levels of experience. And the synapses will find ways of fitting what you do not, in earnest scrutiny, divine as meaning, into correlations which exceed your deliberate quest for handles and knobs and translations and cognitions. I know that this is true. I have watched whole audiences of musically pre-literate adolescents get totally wiped out by a Mahavishnu Orchestra set, and baby that is t-o-u-g-h music.

I started out to tell you how I got drunk at Donte's and stayed for four sets and promised to get the waitress, a lovely and indulgent lady, into movies where she really could do a lot of good with a few dazzlingly skeptical smiles. And I went off at my customary tangent, making a solemn and heartfelt plea for active musical tolerance. Just play the music and live with it — don't try to reach, until you know that's what comes next. But there I go again.

And how did I work up this much zeal? By listening to the Kellaway band. Band? Oh, shit. It's more of the Kellaway unexpected, to be sure. Kellaway presided at the piano,

looking like a nobby old chemistry professor, whilst two trombonists and a melophone traded turns at the only working microphone. There was a string bass, and (1) an obvious fill-in drummer who was shortly replaced by (2) the regular drummer. Now that's weird instrumentation, unexpected you might say if you wanted to drive that point right through the fence and into your neighbor's tire.

But it worked. Mostly because the two horns were mellow and facile and responsive to Kellaway's premise. Nicely matched tonally, they were played by George Bohanon and Frank Rosolino. The melophone sort of came with the territory. It was played by a man named Don Elliott, who is a capable jazz amateur, and professionally a singer working for Quincy Jones on studio and sound track contracts. Elliott may have had special credentials for this period material, which makes it impossible to judge his ability, but he blended his tone and technique smoothly into the series of horn solos. The melophone has, I would guess, a range and flexibility roughly within the upper two-thirds of a valve trombone. Interesting . . .

Chuck Demanico played bass much the way Kellaway played the piano, branching out occasionally from conventional period phraseology into the evolved idiom of today. Like movie flashbacks and flash forwards.

John Guerin, more firmly anchored in the past, played his drum kit superbly in a fascinating demonstration of the productive principle of freedom within limitations.

The material? Well, they started

out with an oldie — "I'm Getting Sentimental Over You," and went from there. Between the last couple of sets, Kellaway played a piano solo, which echoed of the great Chicago keyboardists of the late 1930's and early 1940's.

What an extraordinary thing to do, and what a unifying accomplishment! We talk about roots and sources as though we could be in instant touch with our foetal selves, but how do you cast off sophistication? How do you grow backwards? The price of knowledge is the loss of simple wisdom. I think . . .

And I think that Roger Kellaway must be infinitely more complex than I, for I am alienated now from much which I used to cherish.

Time was when I cared a lot about Joni Mitchell and the fresh vitality she brought to that particular sub-gallery of the music long monopolized by Joan and Judy and to a lesser extent by Buffy. Lordy that seems long ago. Before I wearied of the personal travails of Joan and David, and of the chilly sincerity of Ms. Collins, as of the crooning of Gordon and the whining of James. Before the Irish trickery of Van began to wear thin (I hear he's gone to court to block the reissue of his scrumptious bumptious early rock 'n' rolling with *Them*, which seems like an asshole thing to do). Before Ms. Sainte-Marie's vocal defects began to make me wince.

Precious and pretentious, these single super acts. Few of them having the wry self-perspective of a Randy Newman, or the musical and poetic preemptions of a John Hartford, nor even the joyous love of the act of making music which was given simply to the likes of Peter Jameson and Spencer Davis (I hope you have a copy of their modest classic, "It's Been So Long").

Back there in days of my innocence Joni was singing of Michael from mountains, and such was her impress that I kept running into people who swiped a little glory by claiming to have known this Michael, a real kind of folkie guru, very together and superhumanly tranquil, so that the image I retained (forgive me Michael wherever you are) was that of a stifling bore.

She was also singing, and not for the last time, of love's bummers, of a faithless "king in drip-dry and paisley." Some king, huh! Some *sh-muck*, because remember that this was before Women's Lib and what I call the testicular backlash.

Warners held a tidy little Troub' opening for her. Openings were relatively sober and courteous affairs then, sort of like being presented at court, in contrast to our current system of bacchanalia, which are a restaging of the revels of Nero with highlights from the Fall of the Bastille and the Mason City Hog Show. You would have been thrown out then for what you're expected to do now.

Laura Nyro was there, or so Ellen Sanders told me later. And other "ladies of the canyon." I was there, recklessly sober, and so was another Leonard — Leonard Cohen, friend and countryman of the star. Plus less than half-a-roomful of jes' plain folks.

An intimate setting, so casual that, when she broke a string, she could call out to Leonard Cohen to fix it for her. He raced upstairs with her guitar and was back in a trice. But when she made to tune it, the peg was wound backwards, and Cohen called out that he'd done it in front of the mirror. Did that honestly happen in that relentless career machine where Roy Harper once offered stonily to piss on the ringside customers (not as a Lenny Bruce rip-off, but *really piss* on 'em) and Judy Sill called a heckler "asshole?" Yes, it did. It was neat, and people loved it . . .

The second time I saw her, she kissed me on the mouth. She was in her dressing room before a concert, and someone said "Leonard is here." And she turned and kissed before she realized it was a different variety of Leonard. I guess she was disappointed, but I had already kissed her back so all I could do was grin and mumble. "I told you when I came I was a stranger."

And the next time was at Big Sur, just a few short days after the third act climax of the 60's at Woodstock, which inspired her to write that dreadful and rhetorical hymn of premature self-congratulation which described that singular event in quasi religious terms.

But there was another time bet-  
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## Kellaway & Joni Mitchell

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ween — again at the Troubadour, where she no longer endured the squalor of the dressing rooms but rather held court like a lady Donovan in the club's offices. I had a tape for her of a Vietnamese folk singer, but it was difficult to get near enough to hand it to her because the floor was littered with teenie girls in various attitudes of adoration. She was doing a watercolor and wasn't much interested in anything else. (Later, to my disgust, I had to ferret out a set of watercolors "just like Joni Mitchell's" for my lady, alone enough to take the bloom off any act.)

By then her frail voice, always dependent on glottal gimmicks, was showing the strain of over-exploitation, and she'd run through most of her best material, while her new songs glinted more of green than solid gold.

And in another meantime, I had seen Judy Collins, or maybe it was a

replica by Mattel, and I drank up fast so my drink wouldn't freeze in its glass. And walked out on a flabby earnest Gordon Lightfoot. And thought so little of Van Morrison that I didn't make the usual effort to give my tickets away.

What's been lost — the humor of it? The intimacy? The illusions which paradoxically were most plausible close at hand, and shallowest at the distance? All of these, I would say, but less these than that deadliest of human impoverishments, the failure to grow. All that happened was that the audience got bigger, stifling in its rigid loyalties, and immensely stimulating to artists' managers, who shape careers with little or no concern for the creative frailty of a singer-writer.

Yet what would you do if you had a client who was perishable, who had only so many sound performances in her, and who was also a woman, subject to fading from what the public conceives of as beauty? You'd owe it to her, to yourself, to make her as rich as possible as quickly as possible. Go for gravy, and let her plan another career off there in the diminished days beyond stardom.

I guess.

I'm troubled by all of this, knowing that it is so because we make it so. And alienated with every passing day from this sorry use of the joyous art. There are better ways, and I draw my optimism from thinking about Roger Kellaway ...





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*(continued from page 25)*

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