

## The Pop Life

# It's Not Only a Composer Who Gives a Song Life

By JOHN ROCKWELL

Creators are more prized than re-creators, and justly so. In pop music, at least since the days of Dylan, it has been the singer-songwriter, instead of the mere singer, who has earned the greatest blend of adulation and critical respect.

This has hardly been the case throughout the history of American popular music. The great singers of the nineteen-twenties, thirties and forties, sang mostly other people's songs, and even in the rocking and rolling fifties, stardom was split between those who wrote their own material (Chuck Berry) and those who concentrated on others' (Elvis Presley). To this day, popular performers persist who aren't known as composers, particularly in middle-of-the-road.

It was Bob Dylan who started the cult of the singer-songwriter in earnest, and most of those who have followed him owe something to his image and his imagery. Certainly Joni Mitchell, whose new live double album of her 1974 touring will be out in a couple of weeks, started as a female variant of a recognizable Dylan archetype.

But like Mr. Dylan himself, Miss Mitchell moved very quickly past the folkie-with-polysyllabic-pretensions stage and evolved into the marvelously special artist she is today. And the tours and their recorded document, entitled "Miles of Aisles," serve to certify her emergence from coffeehouse cultism into mass stardom.

Sixteen of the 18 songs are from her previously recorded albums. The new performances, some accompanied only by guitar or piano but most making use of Tom Scott and his jazzy L. A. Express, will please both Mitchell fans and a broader public. Most are interesting variants on the studio versions, and several are strikingly superior.

One's only complaint might be that after four sides, it all begins to blur together a bit.

Partly this is because Miss Mitchell's themes, being obsessive, become repetitious; partly it's because she overuses certain mannerisms from song to song (deliberately letting the voices play into a yawing wobble; sliding up to notes at the ends of phrases from a whole tone below).

But primarily it's because for all her wonderful gifts as a song writer, and for all the ingenuity and personality in the way she uses her voice, Miss Mitchell isn't really a wide-ranging performer: Her voice simply isn't naturally good enough for that.

And here is where present-day performers can still play a part. Maria Muldaur, after kicking around for a good 10 years, has finally come forth with two albums that prove her a stylist we can't do without (she will be at Avery Fisher Hall in person Monday, accompanied by Benny Carter and a jazz combo). And Linda Ronstadt, blessed with as fine a voice as pop music has to offer today, may have now produced the album that will win her a similar kind of mass stardom, which she obviously deserves.

Miss Ronstadt's new album, due out next week, is called "Heart Like a Wheel." It is her most varied disk since "Silk Purse" and, on a few hearings, probably her best ever. Capitol says that the single may be either the soulful "You're No Good" or the country-rocking "When Will I Be Loved," both possible hits. But one imagines that the same public that made her "Long, Long Time" a singles hit a couple of years back would snap up the title track, too, as poignant a ballad as she has ever recorded. ("Heart Like a Wheel" is by Anna McGarrigle, Kate McGarrigle's elder sister and the composer of the exquisite "Cool River" on Miss Muldaur's latest album, which makes one wonder what other songs Miss McGarrigle has ready.)