

"Citybilly" folksters

Mike Seeger, City Ramblers go "bluegrass" at Gemini VI

By STEPHEN POTTIE
Gazette Staff

Last week, Gemini VI presented traditional folk singer Mike Seeger who provided a full evening's worth of entertainment even compensating for having to sleep through class next day.

Mike, a member of the famous family that includes Pete Seeger and Peggy (Seeger) MacColl, is what critic Nat Hentoff calls a "citybilly"; that is, an urban bred singer who leans towards the style of the mountain people of Tennessee, Virginia, and Appalachia.

Hillbilly or bluegrass music has its roots in the old Anglo-Saxon ballads with a strong influence from negro blues.

Mike Seeger is known mainly as a member of one of the better bluegrass groups, The New Lost City Ramblers.

He soon made the audience feel at home with a resume of his present activities. "We weren't getting work together, so we split up for a while. John Cohen (one of the three) is building a house right now. I'm doing these single jobs. Soon, we're going to Germany on tour. Funny thing. We can get work easily in Europe, but not in our home country."

Why they aren't appreciated I'll never understand. Of course, Mike has no problems. His last name gives him a head start even though he sometimes wishes that he didn't have to live it down. It's never, "You're Mike," it's, "You're Pete's brother."

Mike, however, is far from being an understudy of his brother's. The most striking thing about him is his exciting and accomplished instrumental work. A master of "six or seven" instruments, he demonstrated his talents on the banjo, guitar, auto-harp, and mouth harp.

As with all his music, the banjo playing is country style. It lacks the pyrotechnics of Scruggs-style three-finger picking, but makes up for it with strong driving rhythm and two-finger picking. Mike started the evening, and



NEW LOST CITY RAMBLERS

each succeeding performance, with banjo tunes such as "Old Joe Clark", "The Cuckoo Bird", and "Cripple Creek". Of these, his close version of "Cumberland Mountain Deer Chase" and "Doe Boggs' style 'Pretty Polly'" were especially notable.

The authentic country playing brought up question that the new crop of intellectual critics frequently like to ask: is it right to imitate music of another era. Mike's answer to that question is more than sufficient.

"I sing traditional songs simply because I like them. Although I do try to achieve a certain sound, my style is natural for me... strongly influenced by country and bluegrass singers."

The auto-harp is one of the instruments I find fascinating and even more so when Mike

played it. It is undoubtedly a simple instrument to play, but that by no means dilutes its interest when it is played well. He used it several times, such as on "Carter Blues", "When First to This Country" and "Bonaparte Crossing the Alps", for accompaniment, but it reached full impact on the engrossing instrumental "San Antonio Rose".

Folk guitar is so often just a series of cliches that Mike's playing is, as J.T. Morley would say, "incredible". In fact, one of the non-serious highlights of the evening was a hilarious satire on folk guitar players, "Burglar Man".

Mike's singing is perfect for the high lonesome, airy vocals that mark the best of the traditional singers. His vocal style, as with his instrumental style, is

deeply rooted in the hillbilly singing but it is not just a duplication. It reflects a strong personal and regional tradition plus its own stamp of individuality.

Most of Mike's repertoire comes from old recordings of the mountain and bluegrass singers. His knowledge of the singers and their songs is very extensive. References to the old backwoods musicians such as Uncle Dave Macom, Jimmie Rodgers, Elizabeth Cotton, the Dixon Brothers, and the Carter Family fill his speech as naturally as the Beatles and rock singers fill the conversation of teenagers. His vast knowledge is not limited to talk, his performance was filled with signs of his mastery of their styles. Which is one of Mike's main advantages over the old timers; they had one style that, however interesting, could wear; Mike is able to borrow freely from them while adding his own personal statement. The result is a varied and consistently engaging performance.

Above all his credentials and musicianship, Mike established a very close rapport with the audience after warming up in the first show. Around the end of the evening, the relationship became almost personal. I was not talking to Mike Seeger the professional folk singer, but a new-found friend who wanted to share some of his experiences and sing the songs that he felt had a lasting beauty. That was Mike Seeger.

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MAID MARION

Misery, according to Snoopy, is having to write a weekly column and having nothing to write about. Therefore, the following will be about nothing so you might as well stop reading it right now.

Actually nothing is a fascinating topic. It can be extended to the study of irrelevancy, trivia, philosophical meditations on the concept of zero and the sociological and psychological implications of the imponderable.

All this means exactly nothing so we're back where we started. I remember the system my best friend and I worked out in Grade 3. Through various machinations, nominations and threats or dire things, we got ourselves elected as president and secretary of the classroom Junior Red Cross Society for six years running, at which time she moved to another town and I lost interest. It was very important to us because the executive appointed blackboard cleaners every week and we'd unload that duty regularly on our "enemies". The system of parliamentary democracy, which we were supposedly being taught, was either highly successful or unsuccessful, depending on your viewpoint.

The foregoing paragraph was wholly irrelevant which is a good thing because in being irrelevant it becomes relevant. I have just proven that you can write about nothing, successfully or unsuccessfully again according to your point of view.

I think that Halifax should be renamed "The Windy City". Every girl has nightmares about that big date and that special hairdo and the high wind which can ruin a carefully constructed coiffure in seconds. It is almost enough to make one decide upon the Yul Brynner look.

Winter Carnival is coming up and Compata-Match is leaping to the rescue of lads and lassies in distress. Only catch is that it costs three dollars to get in on the fun. And "mechanical" engineers are arranging it. Somehow, the term "mechanical" puts a different light on the whole affair.

I don't think there's one thing about Dal that I dislike more than the custom of posting Christmas marks so the whole world can see just what you got or didn't get. Please, Madam Registrar, must we? I mean, couldn't we get our examination papers back instead. I cannot decide whether Dal is highly advanced or definitely backward.

Well, I've managed to write an illuminating column on trivia. Maybe next week I'll get to philosophical meditations on the concept of zero.

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