

'softly killing his audience with his songs'

Don McLean

by Glenn Walton

Don McLean, the American Pieman with the melodic gift and the lyric voice, has committed the cardinal sin of show business: he has refused to bend to whatever-is-the-current musical taste. Instead, he has followed his own straight and simple inclinations in music. In short, he is not a hit maker.

A solid body of high quality work over the past decade is witness to a continuing and diverse creativity that has largely been ignored on commercial radio. The fact that the marketers of instant musical trends insist on pinning McLean to his biggie hits (American Pie, Vincent, And I Love You So) is a great injustice to his work, and of great irony. Long since relegated to the hit lists of the past, McLean keeps on writing, singing, and softly killing his audience with his songs.

Don McLean played at the Cohn this week. His entrance was characteristically un-theatrical: dressed in jeans and simple shirt, he hardly paused to acknowledge the applause of recognition before launching into "Bronco Bill's Lament," the witty reminiscences of an ageing former cowboy star. The McLean voice is strong and clear, with a fine lyrical timbre that its owner knows how to use: it is happily debatable whether Don McLean sings or writes songs best. His descriptive and straight-forward guitar accompaniments are a not-too-distant third to his other talents.

Love ballads, songs on environmental waste, and virtuoso banjo solos followed. The initial hesitancy of the audience to embrace its star (in itself a sign of integrity) disappeared as the concert progressed, although no conscious and condescending effort was made to be charming.

Spontaneity is a problem for the performer, but the chemistry that carried the McLean concert along allowed easy integration of even the most overly-familiar of his songs. It is one of McLean's talents to bring thousands to sing along, even in rounds, and his watermelon song with its waves of orchestrated audience slurping was a crowd pleaser. His between-songs patter revealed an urbanity and comic timing that is apparent in his clever and often eloquent lyrics ("He plays the English language like a pinball machine" one reviewer once said).

McLean's encore, a song by his spiritual mentor Buddy Holly, was sung without the microphone. "We'll do this one without electricity," he said, stepping to the front of the stage. McLean commented that before **American Pie** was released, Buddy Holly had been practically forgotten, and that it was a great source of satisfaction to him that nowadays Holly's more popular than ever. He sang **It Doesn't Matter Anymore**, to over a thousand people who heard every word, the auditorium posing no problem for McLean's voice. But then, direct contact is what his artistry is all about.

I requested an interview backstage, and despite the fact that McLean had another show in a half hour, it was readily granted. A small group of road managers and his friends were talking quietly backstage, as I was brought into the dressing room. McLean was relaxing with a bottle of Heineken. He also talked quietly, not wanting, I presume, to strain his voice.

Q: When you come to places like Halifax, N.S. does it awe you that people know you?

A: It's amazing actually. I've had this experience in many countries and I've gotten a little bit blasé about it. You know after you have been to 10 or 15 countries several



times you almost get a little blasé about it and that's not good. I try to remind myself that it's certainly amazing.

Q: Well that leads into my second question: do you find it difficult maintaining your spontaneity on stage?

A: No, it's easier now than it was a few years ago, for some reason. I don't know why but I feel very spontaneous, most of the time. I don't feel the need to be new all the time, don't need to always be different, but I do feel the need to subtly reinterpret stuff.

Q: I suppose the audience makes a difference too: it must help.

A: Sometimes, it depends. In the beginning when you're starting out, the audience helps you along. Certainly you go through changes with the audience, you grow with it.

Q: I must say I have never seen a performer warm an audience as well as you did tonight. I thought it was rather cold at the beginning...

A: Well, I enjoy people, and if you're into what you're doing that feeling will spread through the room.

Q: Do you ever get tired of singing hits?

A: I would like to have a different feeling to look forward to. I feel that singing hits... wastes my talents a little bit. I suppose if I was freer to do everything that I wanted to do all the time I could do different things, but in the same breath it's also something that's a gift and it's provided me with that audience—so it's a trade-off.

Q: What does fame—or maybe a better word would be recognition—mean to you?

A: I'm not all that famous. I'm sort of famous. I'm not John Lennon or any of those people, but I've had a little of it. If it gets out-of-hand it can get to be a drag, because

people can harass you, say things about you... It's a loss of privacy and in my case, it's very serious. I don't want to be so famous that I would lose my privacy and have to have guards, Pinkertons around, and people like that. Fame is okay if you're really doing something for people and you're getting something out of it.

Q: Do you find that show business makes unreasonable demands on you?

A: Oh, it's unreasonable all around. You get paid unreasonably, it makes unreasonable demands, it has unreasonable standards. In its own realm you've got to have a lot of discipline in a sense, to keep your schedule, maintain your level of spontaneity, like you said, deliver what the audience expects in front of you; you do all these things in addition to make money, 'cause if you don't make money for the promoter, you don't get asked back...

Basically I've taken an I-don't-care attitude for years and that's left me more interested in my music and less interested in covering every base. As a result I've got something better than I... only played cities where I'd sell out, you know, doing all those career-move type things that people do: I play everywhere and sometimes I sell out and sometimes I don't. It's nice 'cause I play solo and I don't have a lot of hassles going places and I can get there quickly. I have a

charms

whole bag of songs so it's the ultimate Thoreauvian experience.

Q: Many of your songs are eloquent statements about the reality of American life now.

A: Or the unreality of it!

Q: Do you lend yourself to specific political causes?

A: Not anymore. I'm very cynical about politics, all brands of it, all stripes of it, from Jane Fonda to Ronald Reagan, and all the people who fall into line underneath those figures.

Q: So you think performers should stay out of politics?

A: No, I don't think they should stay out of politics. I think they should be no more than the average guy who shoots his mouth off and says what he wants... Just because you have the right to be in the papers and in the media... people will listen to you. The media has decided therefore that you're a local politician... and therefore you have to justify a statement like "Save The Whales"... I bet if they find out you kick your dog or you're a fat ass or you kicked your horse or something they'd write about it, you see, 'cause you're a hypocrite.

Q: Do criticisms or reviews of your work help you at all?

A: Most of the critics like me better than I like me. I don't think I'm very good most of the time, I think I could use a lot of improving and most of the reviews are very nice. People say wonderful things about me and I'm always amazed.

Q: Does it worry you that nobody has really categorized Don McLean?

A: No, I think it's great. I hope I can slip through another ten years with no one noticing me, going on like I'm doing 'cause I'm really enjoying it very much and I feel free. I feel like I have what I want and I don't have to take all this other crap along with it, the stuff that drives you into a black room with the door locked. I've been there and I know what that is, and it's easy to have that happen. People hound you. If you stay in the business they hound you and if you're out of the business they've succeeded in doing something very bad because you're not permitted to go about your life's work... because people are going to annoy you, read your garbage and photograph you wherever you go. It's all right for a guy who's just a pretty face, but for somebody who is an artist who wants to have some contact with experience... you can't have it. It's death.

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