

Where have all the flowers gone?

BY BARRIE HALE

THE CORRECT tone of Yorkville 1984 was caught in a conversation overheard one recent noon hour on Charles Street. One smartly tailored young career woman was telling another about a bar on Yorkville:

"Have you been there? They've got this outdoor bar, but you can eat inside. It looks like a real meat market, but the food inside is really terrific."

That is a long way from the days when balladeer Buffy Ste. Marie sang of the Universal Soldier, "the one who gives his body as a weapon in the war." It's a long way from the Vietnam draft resisters and deserters, and from Ian and Sylvia and Gordon Lightfoot, freaks and hippies and **Joni Mitchell**.

The two women strolling on Charles are too young to have known that Yorkville — what they grew up with is the Edwardian theme park version of the 1970s, the extension, in a way, of the lobby of The Four Seasons hotel.

Twenty years ago Yorkville seemed to be the heart and soul of Toronto counter-culture, whatever that happened to be each passing year. Yorkville now is the culture in a city so adept at packaging pleasure there is just about nothing that doesn't fit in.

Some of the people who thronged Yorkville 20 years ago may be found now in the Beaches, still selling each other the same stuff they were flogging back in the beads-and-bangles decade. Queen Street West is a "village" centred on club entertainment and art. But neither neighborhood has what Yorkville had going for it then — a characteristic and authentic voice.

By the time the media discovered the place around 1963, Yorkville Village had been talking it up for years, in unlicensed coffee houses similar to those in Beat Generation San Francisco a decade earlier. Poetry and song were the means of expression and the two became one as new generations of singer-songwriters came along every few years, right into the early '70s — the Tysons, Lightfoot and Ste. Marie, **Joni Mitchell**, Bruce Cockburn and Murray McLauchlan, to name a few stars who were to become founders-members of a new Canadian music industry.

What gave Yorkville's voice its authenticity during those changing years was something that doesn't exist in abundance any more — defiance and protest, from the hippies' declaration of love and peace to Maoist cries for destruction. In Yorkville, the voice was heard in such clubs as the Village Corner and the Bohemian Embassy — once listed in the Yellow Pages under "foreign embassies and consulates."

Phil Ochs, probably the most popular American singer-songwriter to perform in such village clubs as the Purple Onion and the Riverboat, sneered at the establishment in Love Me, I'm A Liberal and We're The Cops Of The World.

By 1967 or so, young U.S. exiles — draft dodgers and their sympathizers — had become a village component. During those years, Yorkville itself often looked like a battlefield, which it was, in an up-to-the-minute urban civil confrontation of opposing cultures. There was a lot of hell-raising going on, but beneath it was another war between the young and the old, the system and the dropout, represented by City Hall and the police on one hand, hippie anarchists on the other.

The drama was played out against a background of old brick row houses on Yorkville and Cumberland, duplexes on Hazelton, cottages on Scollard, once the homes of the village's founding citizens — "home-keeping hearts loyally alive to the significance of Dominion Day," according to the Toronto Mail of 1883.

During the 1960s a population of 400 to 600 young people took to the area like bees to a hive, turning the old residences into flower-child crash-pads and functional, utilitarian communal houses. One of these, on Hazelton, had a household representative of the times: an executive officer of an outlaw motorcycle club, his lady, who sewed and had her own room, in which she slept alone most of the time with her own bike, another girl who painted pretty well, a counter-culture journalist and a couple of graduate school academics.

On weekends, and later on any given weeknight, this community swelled into a mob composed of tourists — part-time and weekend hippie kids from Scarborough, Forest Hill and North York, drawn by the music in



McLauchlan (left) and cohorts: today's glitz is a long way from the Yorkville of the 1960s.

the clubs and the general free-loving, free-loving ambience; their parents, drawn by the media blitz and the growing commercial glitz; and many working professionals — journalists, dope dealers, panhandlers, public health and building inspectors and policemen, uniformed and undercover. And when the riots happened the issue was always clear, whatever the cause or outcome — they were about authority, who had it, who wanted it, who had to give it up.

If you go by the arrest records, the police won, but the villagers scored some points. Ron Haggart devoted a newspaper column during the summer of 1966 to the story of a Yorkville girl's day in court and how a magistrate "threatened her with a week in jail, on a remand, on what is probably the most minor charge in the criminal code (vagrancy), a charge that had not been proven against her, and never was." Yorkville's cause was wholeheartedly embraced by June Callwood, who got herself arrested one night in the village. In today's Toronto, such widespread, free protest seems alien.

The street-culture health code being what it was, eventually an epidemic swept the area. Hepatitis, which came and went like a brushfire, even claimed policemen as victims. The Yorkville Diggers' street trailer and residential sanctuary came into existence to help kids on bad trips, clinically and otherwise. By the end of the decade the draft resisters had become army deserters and the kids moving into Yorkville had not left behind anguished parents in comfortable suburban homes; they were street-wise kids with very little to lose.

In the end, it was none of these things that caused the old Yorkville Village to wither and die, it was success — good, old-fashioned mercantile success. The tiny clubs that had first

given the place a forum became night-clubs in all but liquor licencing, with cover charges and all the other accoutrements.

Commercial success attracted more commerce, and residential space began to disappear. Rents went up, followed in leap-frog fashion by property values. The Four Seasons Yorkville has not always been there, nor have Hazelton Lanes or the other fashionable residential-commercial urban infill complexes. But the architects' models for them were all ready when the time was right, along with a flood of new liquor licences. Finally, when the neighborhood was sufficiently "gentrified" again, the successful professional class moved back to Hazelton Avenue.

Large numbers of hippies took off for what was strange new territory indeed for urban kids — the countryside. They were provisioned by natural food stores and guided by The Whole Earth Catalogue along the paths of righteousness for ecology's sake. And those who flourished had learned to keep their heads down and form citizens' committees.

Some resurfaced in the "straight" world as if they hadn't missed a beat. Others remained on the fringes of society, unimpressed by suburban life.

Sitting outdoors in a Yorkville bar where you can eat inside on a summer evening in 1984, the music is Joan Armatrading, via stereo sound system. Of the dozen and more bars and licenced restaurants in the area, only a couple offer live music on a regular basis and there are only three or four street musicians where once there were dozens. Shining, waist-length hair is still seen occasionally, but it comes with a blouson dress and real gold jewelry. That other time, that other place, has vanished in a costume change.



Young people swarmed like bees.