

Riverboat succumbs to the riptide of change

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Yorkville won't be the same
when the treasured home of the folkies closes

Riverboat succumbs to the riptide of change

BY RAY CONLOGUE

THE RIVERBOAT, the space that launched a thousand hips, will almost certainly close its doors forever at the end of this summer. A cramped room that opened before Yorkville's heyday, survived its demise and discovered singers like Bruce Cockburn, Murray McLauchlan, Brent Titcombe and John Allan Cameron in between, the old boat has succumbed to the riptide of changing taste.

Not that owner Bernie Fiedler will admit it.

"There's nothing wrong with the business," says the soft-eyed gentleman who once offered **Joni Mitchell** a dishwashing job. "We still pack them in; it's just that I'm wrapped up in managing my artists and I'm getting kind of tired of running The Riverboat. It's been 13 years now, after all, and enough of a good thing is still enough."

Like many others who once ran, sang in, dishwashed in, or swept floors in the myriad coffeehouses of sixties Yorkville, Fiedler knows that the folk scene isn't dead; it's just gone elsewhere. Many other cafe entrepreneurs found it more simpatico (or lucrative) to manage the artists they discovered, or to go

to work for record companies. Fiedler's own outfit, Finkelstein and Fiedler, manages many of his own discoveries, including McLauchlan and Cockburn.

"But the whole coffeehouse scene has been on the decline since the early seventies, when the bars started booking singers," says Jane Harbury, who was The Riverboat's manager ("call it glorified chief cook and bottlewasher") from 1970 to 1974. "You know, our house only holds 120 people, and all of a sudden you had these great big bars offering singers double the money for three nights that we could pay them for a whole week."

She looks wistful. "Frankly, that meant the esthetics went out the window. Those places aren't like The Riverboat. John Hartford said it was the best sounding club he'd ever been in, and if he ever recorded an album, it would have to be here."

"And it's got character, all warm and glowy. On slack nights, instead of letting the performers sit around and get mosey, we'd all grab chamois and clean the brass."

The brasswork is the chief glory of the place, a series of portholes backlit in subdued green light and set in a richly

varnished wall of wood strips. Last Saturday night, with Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee entertaining, it could well have been the mid-sixties again, when thousands of dragged folkies celebrated the Age of Aquarius on the stoops outside. "Stop wigglin', Baby, or you'll break ol' Doctor Brownie's needle right off," rasped the old black man, while Sonny's blind eyes looked appreciatively around the old-fashioned wooden stalls, filled with the mellow old and the wide-eyed young.

"There was a time I had to rely on American cats," Fiedler would say. "They were my draws." That was from the opening in 1964 until about 1968; and he treated them well enough that they come back today, names like Sonny and Terry, or Tom Rush, who could fill Massey Hall at the drop of a newspaper ad, to the tiny mock-riverboat little room.

"It was kind of a hangout," recalls Harbury. "Sonny and Brownie, Prine, Goodman, Andersen, Rush, Phil Ochs, they all knew Bernie for years and, when they were in town, they'd drop by automatically, maybe do a guest set, or just sit. If they needed somebody to relate to, it'd end up being Bernie or me, and we'd all go out for drinks so they could pour their hearts out."

"In the mid-sixties," says Jeanine Hollingshead, who used to waitress at The Riverboat, "everybody in our house, everybody in our neighborhood, was learning to play music. If I knew 200 people, 190 were learning guitar. A lot of the bands never even had names."

"Those were the pre-California days, before all the Canadian musicians headed out to the west coast so they could come back and be big here, and Fiedler was about the only guy who'd give them a place to play." She recalls going herself to the coast in 1966, "and when we came back a few months later, Yorkville was in bloom. The Mynah Bird, The Underground, a dozen little holes in the wall, the Gate of Cleves where you could hear John Hammond for 50 cents."

"But The Riverboat was there ahead of them, and the music community supported it."

Those were the great and gloomy days of Yorkville. You could be thrilled by the voices of 5,000 demonstrators singing We Shall Overcome as they tried to block car traffic down the main drag; or you could be revolted, as one Globe

and Mail reporter was, by the sight of a police detective wading "into the centre of the demonstration, where he slapped a girl across the face, pulled her by the hair, and then turned to her companion and kicked him in the ribs more than 10 times." David Depoe's volunteer workers ranged the streets, and doctor-hero Anne Keyl fought the plague of syphilis brought on by runaways and bad sanitation. In Queen's Park, a sullen band of Satan's Choice listened despite themselves to an impassioned girl begging them to adopt the creed of Love.

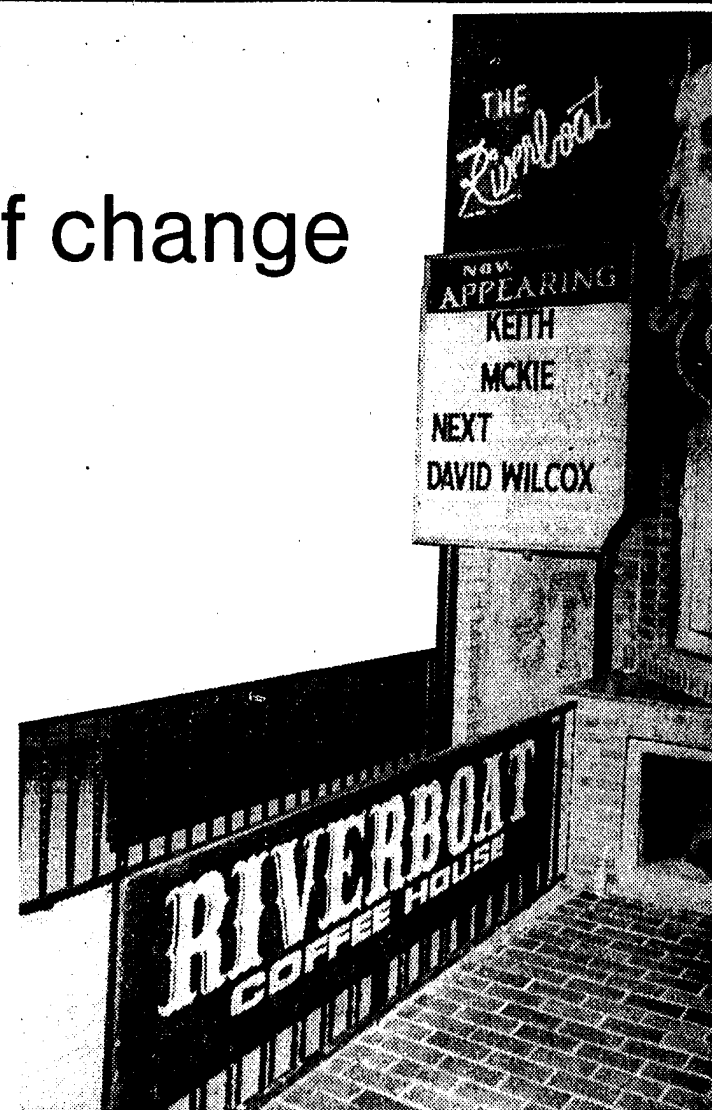
"I got involved in music because I lived on Scollard Street in 1968," recalls Harbury. "Luke Gibson was my next-door neighbor, and music was everywhere. So it was natural to go to work in a place like The Riverboat."

"Not that it could pay much money, but in those days people didn't care about that; they did it for the love of it." She looks wistful. "We were all younger then." The Riverboat was a refuge where no questions were asked and the eccentric was the norm. When Californian Jessie Fuller was beginning to make it big after 90 years of poverty, nobody quibbled when he slept in his van outside the back door and used the Riverboat washroom to clean up. He'd say he was saving it for his kids, in case hard times came again, and the waitresses would nod understandingly. It was an example of an ambience that Fiedler always preferred to call "family."

"Why, man," he told a reporter in 1972, "a couple of weeks ago we had a miniature ping pong tournament right in this room, and the cats playing were Lightfoot, Mitchell, Jackson Browne and Jerry Jeff Walker." (Though The Riverboat has never been licenced, one of the family services involved serving Jerry Jeff something called a 'lunchbucket' while onstage. The lunch, of course, was liquid, and it always seemed to quicken his step.)

The camaraderie survived indoors, but outside things were changing. By that year, all the other folk clubs had gone under, including the venerable Purple Onion which pre-dated the Riverboat. The \$12-million Hazelton Lanes project, most kindly described as a high-income ghetto, was under construction and the Hyatt Regency Hotel was nourishing a flock of pretentious jewellers and exotic carpet purveyors under its capacious and well-groomed wing.

"I guess I first started trying to sell



Fiedler's Riverboat still draws the big names who love the 'family' feeling there.

the place around then," says Fiedler, "but none of the deals ever quite came through."

And maybe Fiedler didn't try as hard as he could have. "He loves the place," says Harbury, "and so did all the singers who kept on singing there for sentimental reasons when they could make twice as much at the El Mocambo or the Horseshoe. I mean, these guys don't forget that Bernie rescued them out of bars when nobody in bars listened to a singer."

"The problem is, though, that Toronto people have grown up about their booze. Now a sensitive singer can perform at the El Mocambo and you can hear a pin drop. He doesn't need a liquor-free refuge like a coffeehouse any more."

"The Riverboat is the end of an era," says Hollingshead, "but the era's been ended for five years. It doesn't seem to matter any more, the intimacy of hearing somebody in a little place instead of with 1,000 people somewhere else. Oh, other places try, like The Groaning Board, but they can't do it. The Riverboat had atmosphere: the lights went down, the show started, and you knew it."

It wasn't somebody sitting in a corner and reaching over the heads of the crowd."

It's perhaps ironic that Fiedler's latest, and most certain, offer involves turning the house into a wine bar. "It's something that's big in Europe," says Fiedler, "a classy place where the only beverage served is wine. For sure, it's the coming thing in this city. That's the way things are going now."

But one thing is quite certain: there won't be any room in a wine bar for the shy lady with the yellow vinyl radio who used to come religiously every Thursday night, or the girl who paid admission for her Irish setter "because he just loves Bruce Cockburn." There was free play for the furry edges of Toronto in the days when a house in Yorkville could be had for \$20,000. Now it costs that much to rent a shop for a year, and both buyers and sellers are flintier spirits.

"It took a funny kind of energy to make the music thing happen the way it did," says Hollingshead. "A coffeehouse was a family thing, like Bernie would say, and it couldn't have been what it was if it weren't for him."



Murray McLauchlan: an early discovery.



Joni Mitchell: offered dishwashing job.