



The landlocked Riverboat featured new names like Mitchell and Taylor.

THE RIVERBOAT RUNS AGROUND

BY RAY CONLOGUE

THURSDAY NIGHT, the Riverboat started putting in to shore. Dan Hill appeared on its tiny stage to help pay off some outstanding debts, as he did again last night; and Murray McLauchlan will do likewise tonight and tomorrow night.

Then — finally — it's over.

Last summer, I wrote an end-of-boat article which proved premature. CTV's Ron Carlyle stepped in to try to keep it alive, but gave up last month after a year's valiant effort. He turned it back to founder Bernie Fiedler, who wasted no time pulling some of the celebrity strings Carlyle couldn't, to close the show with a grand slam.

Fiedler was off to one side at the back, lost in the perpetual gloom caused by the light-swallowing dark pine boards that line the walls and even the ceiling. It's always been a claustrophobic house, with the brass portholes that you know don't look out on anything, and a seasickness of wood all around; but it seemed smaller than usual on Fiedler, who has a smattering of grey in his hair now, and a paunch that wasn't there thirteen years ago. Not that grey hair makes him seem out of place; but the aura of being a major manager, a moneymaker who dashes back and forth to L.A., that definitely makes him look out of place. Like a hefty adolescent trying out his crib again.

"Gee, I'm gonna miss this place," Dan Hill is saying. "I used to sub here a lot, you know when somebody didn't show up they'd call me cause they knew I was always just sitting around" — a jiggle of eyebrows, a groping of hands — "waiting for a call."

Now, of course, he is another of the boat's distinguished alumnae, just back from L.A. **Joni Mitchell** still lives down that way, doesn't she? And Lightfoot spends half his year there. But not Dan Hill. "These L.A. record executives were hinting about getting me a band and a rock sound so I could play for 30,000 people at once, and lining up interviews, when I said I had to go. Why? Well, I said, I got an important commitment. Where? Well, playing for 100 people."

No sooner do we laugh than he's singing a song about not wanting to be an American. He'll also sing about a black taxi driver in Atlanta, and wanting to get into his head, to see where he's coming from. Then he'll sing about a prostitute he took to his room, and wanting to get into her head, to see where's she's coming from.

Hill wanted no press there because, said one record company lady, "he's an earth person, he wanted it to be a heartfelt farewell to the Riverboat." It seemed appropriate; I haven't felt so much humid sincerity since I was 17, and that's about where the Riverboat came into my life. Now that I'm 28, I can't help but notice a contradiction between Hill's openness and his authoritarian attempt to bar the press from a public performance. Hill himself will not notice it: he lives in a lucid and painful monodimension of no paradoxes. That may be better than my cynical ambiguity. Is it possible that, if more were like Hill and fewer like me, the Riverboat would have chugged merrily along to Glory Itself?

Perhaps it's because the boat's onetime audience no longer exists, patched and daubed by time into something different, that it is Hill's fans and not Riverboat fans who fill the house. The little girl across from me, vulnerable as the quaver in Hill's voice, almost faints from the heat. She gropes to the washroom, misses his entrance; but stumbles

back to her seat and remains entranced, misty-eyed, through the long, song-filled set, the two encores. She's never been here before. At each song's beginning, her face brightens with joyful recognition. The pain, the catch in his voice, his vulnerability; if only he'd met her instead of those nasty women who complicate his life so much.

Perhaps adulthood is subject to its own illusions, but it seems to me that Riverboat music once mobilized ideals by calling us to action: let's *do* something before the years rob us of our energy. *We want a Revolution NOW* Judy sang. But Fiedler is right: a re-hash of that would be a ludicrous implety in 1978. Let us acknowledge the present: Hill singing about the tragedy of an Indian woman.

Cut off her hand, and be angry when she bleeds/ Cut off her arm, and command her to climb/ Different race, different culture, different time. Plain-tive. Empathetic. But don't give her a gun. We've had Wounded Knee already, and it's never coming round on the gee-tar again. We sing a different language now: caring and being confused. It's cleaner.

On Hold Me, that lyric ode to holding onto one's goodness against the evil which is always out there, never inside, the audience picks up the rising hopeful melody so strongly that Hill doesn't need to sing anymore. He smiles; he loves the feeling of goodness he rouses in his audience, and they love him for doing it. For a few moments, the place rings with exaltation.

"To me," Hill is saying, "the Riverboat wasn't just a folkie thing. It was a place where people could come to communicate. And I know it will come to life again somewhere, because there's always a need for a place like that."

True. But for now, it's well and truly dead. And Hill is not the last cowboy come to mourn the passing of the West. He's the preacher sent form out East to make a pretty funeral oration, and he does it with all the understanding one might expect.