

# Down by Yorkville's old Riverboat, that's where some big names began

By JACK BATTEN

**B**URNIE FIEDLER has in the back files at his office, which is located way up on the 23rd floor of the Village Green Apartments in mid-town Toronto, a couple of promotion photographs that, in an odd and funny way, trace Fiedler's career as the city's longest-established hustler of folksinging talent.

One picture shows a young, rather baby-faced man decked out in a neat, very early-Beatles haircut, one that displays plenty of right ear. It's Neil Young, circa 1964, before he grew scraggle-haired and rich.

The other photograph is also of a young man, perched uncomfortably on a rock, strumming a guitar, wearing cowboy boots and a haircut and facial expression that suggest a kind of benign hick. This one is Gordon Lightfoot, also circa 1964, before he became sleek and famous and well-to-do.

Burnie Fiedler not only knew both performers circa 1964—he also gave them gigs in his coffeehouse, the Riverboat on Yorkville Avenue, long in advance of the days when Young and Lightfoot won the attention of practically everyone in the world who cares about popular music.

Fiedler did the same for others—for Joni Mitchell, Murray McLauchlan, Bruce Cockburn—which isn't to say that he discovered them but that he at least offered them a forum at a time when nobody much cared about Canadian pop talent.

"Yeah. I remember when Joni Mitchell first showed up," Fiedler, a calm, soft-eyed, low-key fellow of 33, was saying one afternoon this week. "She was Joni Anderson then, and she was singing for a couple of bucks a night in some tiny little place in town. I went around and heard her and offered her a guest set at the Riverboat.

"She sang mostly standards in those days. I think Circle Game was the only good thing she'd written up till then. Anyway, she sang the guest set and then she bugged me to give her a week in the club. I told her she wouldn't draw anybody and I offered her a job as a dishwasher because I felt sorry for her. Imagine Joni Mitchell washing dishes.

"But she kept after me, and finally I gave her a gig. Now that she's a giant name she keeps asking me to let her back in the club. But that wouldn't make sense now. I mean, the place only seats 120 people."

Fiedler likes to tell similar stories about the other just-starting Canadian singers. Young, for instance, he remembers as "a cat with no kind of voice at all. He was with the Mynah Birds rock band, and he'd come into



Gordon Lightfoot before fame came.



Joni Mitchell finally got her gig.



Neil Young before the hair and money

the club to sing at our open hoots every Monday night, and even though his voice wasn't much, everybody thought he was one fantastic songwriter, which he proved when he split for California and got going with the Buffalo Springfield."

As for Lightfoot: "I first heard Gordie when he was singing upstairs at Steeles Tavern. I booked him into the Riverboat, and he came because he figured a coffeehouse audience was a step up over a bar audience. Of course, for a long time there was hardly any audience at all. People just didn't turn out, and it took a lot of work before Gordie caught on.

"The thing was in those days that Toronto wouldn't listen to Canadian acts. They'd come to the club and say, 'Canada? Forget it.' So to make the club go I had to rely on American cats like Tom Rush and Eric Andersen. They were my draws. Now look what's happened. The CRTC and nationalism and everything else has turned things around, and the Canadians, Lightfoot and Mitchell and the others, have out-

lasted the Americans."

Fiedler himself has needed almost as much staying power as some of his stars to make the Riverboat a success, and his own career reads like a biography that might be lifted from the jacket notes of any folksinger's album. He grew up in Berlin and left Germany on his own, coming to Toronto in 1957 when he was 18. He took a factory job then hired on a Simpsons as a Christmas gift wrapper, then became a salesman for a coffee company.

His selling territory included Yorkville Avenue where he met a fellow named Werner Graeber who was in the process of pioneering the coffeehouse business on Yorkville with his 71 Club. Graeber talked Fiedler into trying a club on his own, and he abandoned the coffee company for a spot called the Mousehole.

Entertainment was non-existent at the Mousehole—the format was strictly coffee, conversation and chess—except when musicians wandered in

to strum for fun and not for pay. (Historical note: Alan McCrae was the first prominent for-free strummer.) But Fiedler moved in 1964 to open another club, the Riverboat, that would feature paid entertainers.

"Actually I thought I was getting into the business too late," Fiedler says. "Clubs like the Fifth Peg on Church Street and the Purple Onion on Avenue Road were doing good money with Woody Allen and Bill Cosby and Hamilton Camp and that kind of people, and I thought the boom might be over.

"It was rough at first. I couldn't get the acts because the Onion had the folksingers locked up. But I kept in there, and when the Onion finally folded, I had a clear run. And then of course the Canadian thing started to happen."

After all his years in business, longer than any other coffeehouse operator in Canada, Fiedler likes to think of the Riverboat as more than a place of entertainment. The whole thing, he says, is more like, well, family.

"Why man, a couple of weeks ago, right in this room here, we had a miniature ping pong tournament, and the cats playing in it were Gordie Lightfoot, Jerry Jeff Walker, Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne and I can't remember who else. When people come to town to play the club, they come up here to hang out, too, to party and have some good times."

The friendships with the performers pay off for Fiedler in other ways, too. The stars, for one thing, in their travels around the continent, tip Fiedler off to the rising young singers in the folk field. Lightfoot returned from a tour a year ago raving about a man named John Prine. Fiedler booked Prine into the Riverboat at just about the time Prine's career started to zoom. The same deal has worked with others—Kris Kristofferson and Steve Goodman, to name a couple.

Many of the performers don't forget the favors Fiedler did for them in their more humble days and break him in on their current bonanza by letting Fiedler produce and promote their lucrative Massey Hall concerts. He's performed those chores for, among others, Lightfoot, Bruce Cockburn and Joni Mitchell. ("Promote Joni? Wow, all I did was place one tiny little ad in the paper and the hall sold out instantly.")

Fiedler's energies these days are directed toward going after a bigger club audience, either by expanding the Riverboat or moving to a new site. The ideal size, he figures, would be about 500 seats. Then he'd have triple bills with a name band, a medium-popular folksinger and an unknown Canadian act. That way, Fiedler would touch all bases—earn a profit, have fun and, not least, encourage another Canadian performer.



Burnie Fiedler in the Riverboat: 'The thing was in those days Toronto wouldn't listen to Canadian acts.'