

The best and the worst of the 20th century: singer/songwriters

# The topmost of the top ten



**T**HE best singer-songwriter of the 20th century? "Well, naturally it's Joni Mitchell," said a friend of this column. He went on to explain that over the past 20 years her voice and her writing, her composition and her playing had reached a point of expressiveness that was unique in popular music.

The implication was that while Elvis, Dylan, Jackson, Lennon, Elton, Wonder, Holly, and the Simons (Paul and Carly) are mere entertainers, Joni Mitchell's music is high art. It is difficult to agree with this; although Joni Mitchell may be elected to the top ten singer/songwriters of the 20th cen-

tury, she is not by any means the outstanding popular composer.

To put Joni's work above the lyrical brilliance of Paul McCartney and the originality of John Lennon would be perverse. The dissolution of the Beatles after that last impromptu roof-top concert in central London created two singer/songwriters of tremendous ability. McCartney's flourished and his work took on a sweet, unchallenging personality, while Lennon produced an introspective, demanding portfolio which shadowed the issues of the age.

His compositions did not always have the polish of McCartney's but they had a wonderful innocence; and then there was the beauty and originality of his voice which many believe was the core of the Beatles' appeal. I am not certain this is true, but I rate Lennon's ability as singer/songwriter higher than McCartney's, which is why Lennon is ahead of him in the top ten.

Ahead of Lennon is Elvis Presley. Anyone who watched the film, *Elvis*, *An Evening With You*, on television will agree that he is the

greatest pop star of all time. The film, perhaps the most intimate performance that Elvis ever gave, shows him just before the amphetamine period, still sleek and self-mocking. One realised that it was as much his charm and remarkable good looks as his singing that earned the king his crown.

As for the compositions — *Hound Dog*, *Heartbreak Hotel*, *Love Me Tender*, *Don't Be Cruel* — they gain him the No. 2 ranking as singer/songwriter. Incidentally, it is perfectly consistent to be the greatest pop star of the 20th century and only the second greatest singer/songwriter.

The No. 1 slot is occupied by Bob Dylan (or Robert Allen Zimmerman of Duluth, Minnesota). It has been since the early sixties when *Blowin' In The Wind*, *Mr Tambourine Man*, *The Times They Are A-Changing*, and *It Ain't Me Babe* were released. Dylan is a love poet of genius; he is the master of the neat and apt phrase, and the pilot of the most original course in popular music.

He is also an inspired balladeer and the author of nonsense verse which should be treasured. Here are the first

lines from the *Ballad Of The Thin Man*:

*You walk into the room,  
With your pencil in the hand.  
You see somebody naked and  
you say,  
'Who is that man?'  
You try so hard,  
But you don't understand,  
Just what you'll say when  
you get home."*

His voice, by turns caustic, melancholic, wheedling and triumphant, was perfectly suited to his subject matter in the sixties. You can hear it the moment you read these lines of *Subterranean Homesick Blues*:

*Keep a clean nose,  
Watch the plain clothes,  
You don't need a weatherman  
to know  
Which way the wind blows."*

In 1968 Dylan took up the electric guitar, and in 1969 produced the Nashville Skyline album. It is for this and for the *Blood On The Tracks* (1975) album that he wins the nomination.

While you prepare for the Dylan revival that will ease us into the next century, perhaps you would like to consider the top ten singer/songwriters of this century:

1 Bob Dylan. 2 Elvis Presley. 3 John Lennon. 4 Paul McCartney. 5 Elton John. 6 Bob Marley. 7 Paul Simon. 8 Roy Orbison. 9 Eric Clapton. 10 Joni Mitchell.

**Centipede**