

MOVIES

For partisans only

By Joseph Gelmis

"Celebration at Big Sur" is an inferior film but will be of interest chiefly to partisans of certain rock and folk performers who are willing to see their favorites under any conditions.

It does serve at least one other useful function, however. It is so poorly filmed and edited that it reminds us how much we take for granted the technical excellence of pictures such as "Woodstock" and "Gimme Shelter."

"Celebration," which opened over the weekend at local theaters, occurred midway between the Woodstock summer and the Altamont winter (where the Hell's Angels savaged the audience). It was held outdoors in late fall on the grounds of Big Sur's Esalen Institute, which is perched picturesquely above the Pacific Ocean.

Participating in the concert was Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, John Sebastian, Carol Ann Cissneros (a Texas folk singer with an exquisitely pristine voice), Dorothy Morrison (a charismatic soul singer), and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young.

At best, "Celebration" is a sort of dim echo of the Woodstock joyousness. The cameras are not certain what to dwell upon. Part of the solution of filmmakers Baird Bryant and Johanna Demetrakas is to do simplistic, literal intercutting of photographed images of the things which are in the lyrics of the songs.

Granted, the possibilities of photographing and editing a concert in a fresh and imaginative manner are fewer with each new film. But the choices made in "Celebration" are just banal and cliched by now. The illustrated song is just embarrassing. It's an admission of the failure of cinematic inventiveness.

And the optical tricks played with Joni Mitchell's face as she sings "Woodstock" (starting with the laboratory process which turns her face golden as she sings "We Were Golden") is reminiscent of a poor imitation of the "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds" sequence from "Yellow Submarine."

Worse, there are entire musical numbers played by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young that are badly recorded and sound as if they were being played underwater. That is the final test of this film. "Celebration" is a record of a concert that is amateurishly recorded, as well as indifferently photographed.

Granted "Celebration" didn't have the built-in dramatic advantages or structure of either "Woodstock" or "Gimme Shelter"—which were, after all, important milestones in the evolution of rock culture. But to be more than a newsreel, a film has to have an internal identity or personality, or a vision that extends beyond the stage, which "Celebration" lacks.



Joan Baez at Big Sur.