

TOM looks RUSH back



MICHAEL SHERMAN

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not copping any excuses up-front. Honest Pakistani, I'm not. But YOU try interviewing a friend some time. Try interviewing someone you've known for some eight years without finding that things like objectivity and that certain tension which comes with a confrontation between strangers (often extremely rewarding, by the by) simply goes by the boards.

Eight years ago when I was a more than moderately successful folksinger working out of Toronto, the scene there was vibrant and incredibly productive. Clubs like the Village Corner, the Gate of Cleve, the Purple Onion, the Mousehole (where a thrush named Vicky Taylor sang her heart out on a song called "Sugar Mountain"; it's composer was simultaneously experiencing difficulty getting gigs) and the still-prominent Riverboat were attracting huge crowds by utilizing a clever policy of offering American "name" folk artists and mixing in a good deal of localized talent.

I was localized. The tall, lean soft-spoken dude from Boston was an import. Probably one of THE most popular imports ever to play Toronto; others included Bob Gibson and Eric Andersen. Anyway, Tom Rush took the place by storm. I can remember more than one occasion where my old lady, moonlighting from her day gig as an insurance executive, would get home from her "fun gig" as a waitress at the Riverboat dragging ass in the worst way. "That Tom Rush," she would invariably mutter, "is great. I love him, but I wish to Christ he wouldn't draw full houses for the 2:00 A.M. set. Not only that,

they just don't want to leave."

That was basically the impact Tom had on Toronto back in the mists of 1964-67. It wasn't the only town Tom tore up in those days. He was a demi-god in Boston, well-known and respected all along the East Coast and God only knows where else (I forgot to ask). He was one of the best singers working in the genre, an excellent, if not flashy, guitarist, and, perhaps most importantly, an incredibly finicky person when it came to choosing songs for his repertoire. We all used to borrow his material and some used to borrow his style. Every time he showed-up for a gig in his sleek little Volvo (which I coveted; one of the first things I always used to inquire about was the health of that automobile) singers in the area knew that at least a couple of choice tunes would remain behind when he split. Tom introduced such hitherto unknown goodies as "You Can't Judge a Book By Its Cover," "Who Do You Love" (in those days few folk were ever aware of a bar gig being played by cats like Bo Diddly) and "Circle Game."

Now, the mention of "Circle Game" warrants a small, but valid, digression. About the time Tom was seducing audiences with that particular tune (Rush is a seducer as opposed to many singers who are essentially rape-prone), its composer, a delicate and introspective young lady named Joni Mitchell, was, like Neil Young, having a tough time getting any worthwhile gigs in Toronto. The Riverboat was THE place to play and Joni wanted to play it. One night my old lady was backstage catching her breath and, as usual, there were a number of people milling around.

Bernie Fiedler, the owner, was rapping with Joni who had apparently hit him up for a gig. Bernie, who is German by birth, drew himself up into his most extreme Erich Von Stroheim posture, and remarked, "I'm sorry, Miss Mitchell, but you are not yet ready to play my club. However, I would be glad to give you a job in the kitchen." Several months later, after her triumphant appearance at that summer's Mariposa Folk Festival, Bernie booked her into his club. There were lines around the block.

The point of the story is quite obvious. Just as he was the first (or at least, one of the first) performers of note to pick up on the talents of Jackson Browne and James Taylor, Rush recognized early on the unique writing ability of Joni.

A few weeks ago Rush sat in the coffee shop of the Continental Hyatt House (how many pop interviews have those garlic pickles been privy too?) and mused about his reputation as a "discoverer" of songwriting geniuses: "Until not too long ago I wasn't writing very many songs of my own and, naturally, I was always on the look-out for good, original material. It never mattered whether or not the writer was established; all I cared about was the song and whether I felt I could do it justice. Without wanting to sound unduly modest, I think that if I hadn't quote unquote discovered writers like Joni and Jackson somebody else would have. Real talent has an uncanny way of making itself known. My latest 'find' (wry chuckle) is a dude named Robert Carpenter. He's a friend of a lot of people on the Toronto scene and his music evokes what I call the gooseflesh reaction; he can make you cry even though you sometimes can't understand exactly what he's trying to say. Of course I can't predict that Carpenter will make it as a writer. Shit, for all I know, he may wander off and become a dogcatcher or a dentist."

The conversation turned to a discussion of the albums Tom has recorded during the past ten years. "Let's see," Rush drawled, "My first album was cut in about 1962 for a Boston label... Oblivion Records (crooked grin)... I think it may have sold in excess of 1500 copies. Then I did two albums for Prestige and sales skyrocketed to about four or five thousand. But at least the figures were going up, not down. I recorded three albums for Electra and the third one did over 100,000. Electra also released a 'best of' album and it went over the 100,000 mark too. To date I've recorded three albums for Columbia and they've all done more than 100,000 copies. I can't complain."

I mentioned that his second Columbia effort (WRONG END OF THE RAINBOW) seemed over-produced and not totally in sync with his basic style and approach. Tom agreed: "That album suffered, I think, from over-listening. Like, after hearing it a hundred times or so you start to get bored and begin adding things here and there. Things got a wee bit cluttered. I'm a lot more satisfied with MERRIMACK COUNTY and not just because I produced it. We spent a lot more time in the planning stages and a lot less time in the

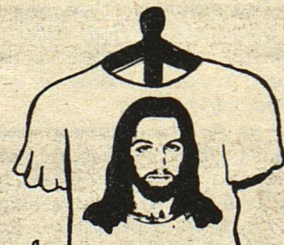
studio. Most of the cuts on the album are first takes. You know, it's funny, but while producing MERRIMACK COUNTY, I discovered that I had really produced — or co-produced — every album I've recorded. All along I've been completely involved in every aspect of my albums and so when I produced this one I found that there was no particularly radical shifts in the role I played."

At the time Tom and I got together for the interview his single "Mother Earth" was receiving a good deal of airplay and the matter of possible commercial stardom came into the rap. Tom fell silent for a moment. "A hit single would quite obviously make things a lot easier in some respects, but I find it difficult to relate to the possibility of a hit in any artistic sense. See, I really think any hit single is primarily a marketing phenomenon. I couldn't regard one as an artistic triumph. If it happens, it happens. Take 'Mother Earth' as an example. I recorded the song back in December. My role was completed that long ago. From that point on I essentially became involved in whatever mysterious

processes go down in the emergence of a hit. As far as quote unquote stardom is concerned, again I can't really relate to it simply because it's something you can't plan for. If it should happen, well and fine. If it doesn't, that's cool too because I enjoy what I'm into. Always have. Little Tommy Rush will just keep on doing what Little Tommy Rush feels is best for him and the rest will take care of itself. It always does."

"Amen" said girlfriend Marsha. "Pass the pickles."

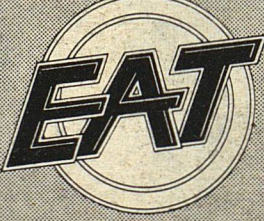
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