

Harry Chapin Shows His Style In Program at the Bitter End

By DON HECKMAN

Singer-songwriter fix Harry Chapin came into the Bitter End Wednesday night preceded by a rising hit song called "Taxi" and a virtual cloud of public anonymity. After hearing his first set, with its range of moods and songs that reached far beyond the limits of "Taxi," I don't expect Chapin to remain anonymous for very long.

Actually, of course, as with all overnight show biz arrivals, Chapin has put in a long apprenticeship, much of it at the Bitter End with his two brothers, and is hardly unknown to New York folk music aficionados. But "Taxi" was the catalyst for him, and he knows it. Like the other songs he sang—especially a superbly atmospheric piece called "Dogtown" and a traveling song called, appropriately, "Greyhound"—"Taxi" is a statement that comes from a mature point of view, both musically and personally.

Chapin's roots are in the wandering, fragmented, self-searching emotions of the beat nineteen-fifties, modified somewhat by a stunning ability to tell a story. Call it folk music, but it is folk music with a contemporary overview and a complex musical syntax.

The group that accompanies

Chapin plays so remarkably well together that one can compare their constantly changing, interweaving musical textures only to the work of a string quartet or an improvising jazz ensemble. John Wallace plays electric bass and sings back-up vocals that literally range from high counter-tenor to deep bass. Guitarist Ron Palmer has to be one of the finest acoustic-electric players I've ever heard; his mastery of harmonics, alone, is a marvel.

The most unusual aspect of the group, however, is the presence of a gifted cellist named Tim Scott. The very sound of his instrument would give any small folk-styled group a different sound, but Scott's constant musicality and unerring ear make his contribution something more than just an unusual texture.

Quite simply, Chapin's singing—and Chapin's group—were unexpected delights. They should be heard. Also on the bill at the Bitter End are the comedy team of Cheech & Chong. I still think they are the funniest and most relevant new humorists to come along in years; but I wish they would start developing some new routines.