

America -- A One-Hit Phenomenon?

By DON HECKMAN

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Pop

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WHATEVER else may be happening to pop music in the seventies, whether or not rock music is or isn't dead, it is rapidly becoming clear that we are beginning to hear a second generation of young performers. No, not a second generation in the literal sense; developments in the magical mystery world of pop music take place much too rapidly to fit into the usual generational chronology. Call it instead a stylistic second generation—an emerging group of young performers who use the major folk and rock and pop music of the late sixties (approximately) as their models.

America—paradoxically, it is an English group made up of the children of Americans living in Great Britain—is a case in point. Their current recording, *America* (Warner Brothers 2576), skyrocketed to the top of the popularity charts, mostly on the basis of a song called, "A Horse With No Name." The group, actually a trio of singer-guitarists, ranges in age from 19 to 21, yet they obviously have already mastered the moody melodies and close harmonizations typical of the work of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young.

Unless they work very hard at finding an identity of their own, however, it seems pretty obvious that America will be a one-hit phenomenon. As such, they illustrate the primary advantages and hazards of belonging to a second-generation. The principal advantage: the models are available for imitation and the styles have been set. The principal hazard: that the ease of imitation can result in nothing more than extremely effective masquerades. The young members of America are going to have to prove that they can move beyond the special ambiguousness of their present success.

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Harry Chapin's almost unobtrusive arrival on the pop scene belied his long-time familiarity to New York folk music fans, who had known his music for years. But Chapin came to national prom-

inence in the last few months with a song called "Taxi," a bittersweet and extremely revealing tale of life on the fringe of the youth-drug culture. The surprise in Chapin's new album, *Heads and Tales* (Electra 75023), is the fact that as good as "Taxi" is, it in no way dominates. Other

songs — a perennial road number called "Greyhound," and a ghostly story of old Massachusetts called "Dogtown," in particular — are every bit as good, and signal the arrival of a fine new talent.

Interestingly, the last song on the album, an almost off-

hand piece called "Same Sad Singer," serves as a counterbalance to "Taxi," expressing an emotional need that is at the polar opposite to the self-focused, false independence of "Taxi." I should also mention the fine group that backs and fills for Chapin. Tim Scott's cello playing finally makes that instrument viable in a pop setting; Ron Palmer's guitar is discreetly brilliant, exactly right as a counterpoint to Chapin's singing; John Wallace's bass work and back-up vocals can't be praised too highly—bear in mind that the high falsetto voice in the middle of "Taxi" is his. All in all, a superb recording, and a must-buy for lovers of quality pop music.

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Hot Tuna — *Burgers* (Grunt Records FTR-1004)—keeps truckin' along. A Jefferson Airplane spin-off group, with Jack Casady, Jorma Kaukonen, Papa John Creach and Sammy Piazza its most prominent members, Hot Tuna specializes in bouncy, blues-tinged music that is reminiscent of the jump-band rhythms of the forties. Kaukonen handles most of the vocals in a nasally-toned voice that is pleasant for two or three tracks, but then becomes a bit wearing. His guitar work, however, is something else; teamed with Casady's superb blues rock bass playing it is one of the most driving sounds in rock. Papa Creach's violin playing always sounds better on recordings to me than it does live, perhaps because he is not always well-served by his sound men. Anyhow, he plays effectively here, and certainly the jazz-tinged improvisations of Hot Tuna are a more appropriate environment for him than the now-cloudy musical skies of the Jefferson Airplane.

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Delaney and Bonnie Bramlett—*D & B Together* (Columbia KC 31377) — don't seem to have been affected much by their move to Columbia. They continue to be among the leaders of rock's

gospel-influenced performers. Their "Friends" are perhaps less stellar on this recording than they have been in the past, but the increased musical integration of the group, and the increased prominence given Bonnie's roadhouse contralto voice are distinct improvements.

The most provocatively rhythmic tune is the already-familiar "Only You Know and I Know," but I was equally impressed by Bonnie's soul-stirring vocals on "I Know How It Feels To Be Lonely" and her own song, "Groupie (Superstar)" — the latter better-known from Karen Carpenter's hit version.

NEW AND NOTABLE

Reissue collections, sometimes including material not previously released, sometimes little more than "Greatest Hits" compilations, have popped up frequently in the last few weeks. Among the most interesting are the following:

MELANIE: The Four Sides of Melanie (Buddah BDS 95005, 2 disks). Excerpts from six different Melanie recordings are here, including "Beautiful People,"

"What Have They Done To My Song Ma," an eight-minute version of "Lay Down (Candles In The Rain)," "Nickle Song," "Ruby Tuesday," "Leftover Wine" and 16 or 17 others. It is, in short, a virtual history of Melanie's music during the period of her record association with Buddah, and illustrates just how gifted and versatile a performer she has become. For the real Melanie freaks, the album cover is somehow constructed so that it can be folded into a cardboard box with a different portrait of the gracious lady on four sides; nice, but sort of a bother if all you want to do is use it for the more mundane purpose of holding the disks.

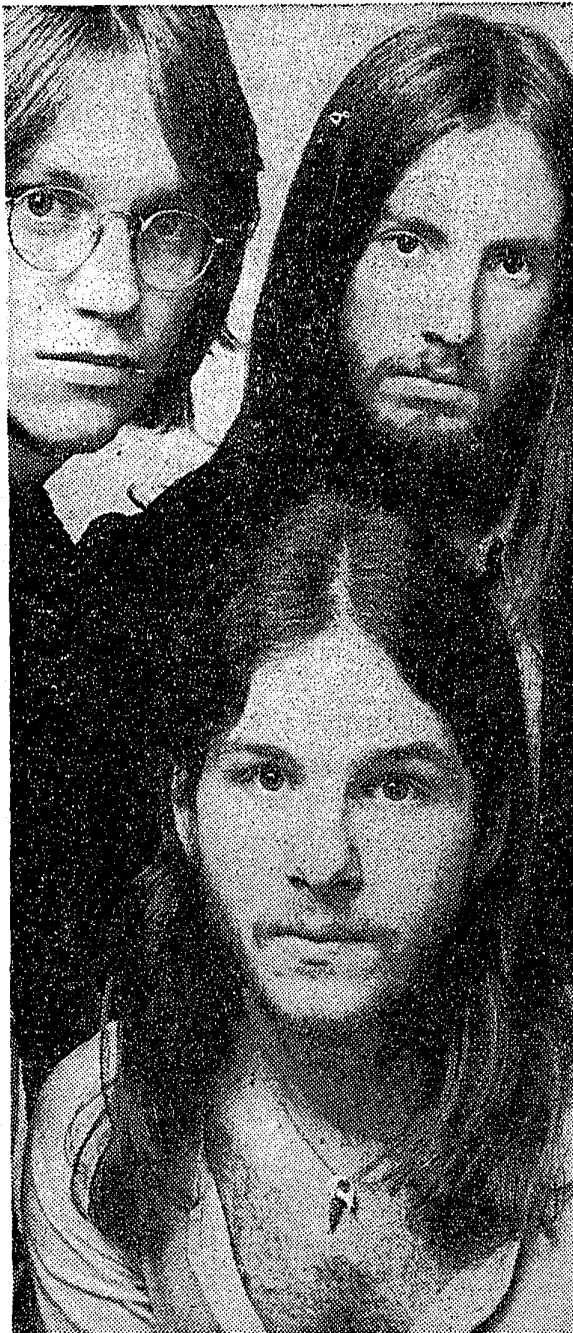
THE KINKS: The Kink Kronikles (Reprise 2XS 6454, 2 disks). The Kinks have never quite received the praise or the popularity—at least from the wider pop audience — that their abilities warrant. They are one of the premiere English rock groups, together for almost a decade, have seen the tides of fashion run from blues revival to acid rock and neo-folk balladry, and continue to chip away at their own fas-

cinating exposure of English working class society. 28 Kinks goodies are included here. Several are either unreleased items or else appeared in the past only as obscure flip-sides of singles. One of the pieces, "Death of a Clown," features Dave Davies on lead vocal and was originally released under his name. The principal Kinks composer and energy source, Ray Davies, wrote most of the other numbers, which represent a remarkable cross-cut view through the music of a remarkable group. Highly recommended.

ERIC CLAPTON: History of Eric Clapton (Atco SD 2-803, 2 disks). This collection will be a bonanza for those who feel that Clapton is the greatest blues guitarist around. The selections range from his early work with the Yardbirds to the classic days with Cream, the less ecstatic period with the all-star group Blind Faith, various collaborations with such performers as Delaney and Bonnie Bramlett and, finally, his own group, Derek and the Dominos. I find Clapton a superb technician, a sometimes pleasant singer, and, in his very best moments, a pro-

vocative blues player. But I can't quite buy the adulation that has followed his career, and that is clearly implied by the title of this set. Good? Yes. Great? Not by my standards.

BIG SUR FESTIVAL (Columbia KC 31138). No, this isn't a reissue. But it is a collection of highlights from a modest rock festival that actually came off, and made a few people happy. The performers — Joan Baez, Kris Kristofferson, Taj Mahal, Mickey Newbury and Blood, Sweat & Tears — appeared for union scale, with Columbia Records paying the festival expenses. Profits from the sale of this recording will go to the Institute for the Study of Non-Violence and the UNICEF fund for Bangladesh. No one does anything surprising, but there are some pleasant crossovers—Joan Baez singing with Mickey Newbury and Kris Kristofferson, a festival group-sing on "Me and Bobby McGee"—and the ambience has the relaxed atmosphere of a group of very talented friends getting together for a pleasant day of music-making. As, in fact, they did.



Carl Samrock
Folk-rock group America
"Trying to find an identity of their own"