

# CLUB SCENES

By Johanna Schier

The Bitter End last week was a wonderful waste. Elyse Weinberg and McKendree Spring, the headliners, and Glen Leopold were all charmingly awful.

Leopold is a hook-nosed young folkie with that rare ability to make you feel comfortable and warm even when his act is embarrassing. He sings a lot like Phil Ochs although he uses his voice more flexibly and dynamically. His apparent tender age and the depressing predictability of his tunes made me feel like a participant in some high school amateur night. Only his last song was original and fun: "The Baked Bean Band," a Jewish romp through the hot dog stands of adolescence.

Elyse Weinberg has a sexy tired voice squishing through her velour-rimmed throat. But there is something compelling about it and I liked the sincere way she came across in that small room. She's what the slicks would call perky, with tousled hair and a smile in the twist of her mouth. Her personal charm was virtually negated, though, by her songs. She writes a stale bouquet of everyone else's flowers: the Beatles (the verse of "Got To Get You Into My Life"), Donovan (the chorus of "Sunny Goodge Street"), Dylan, even Janis Ian. Influences hover like buzzards.

If she's really dedicated to her craft, Elyse could hone her amorphous talent to a fineness. That would probably mean being willing to spend the next five years playing in clubs like the Bitter End, picking up an audience and a style and some good material. If not, she'll make someone a swell singing mommy.

McKendree Spring, the top act on the bill has managed to accomplish with one voice, guitars and a violin what Shadow Morton and the Vanilla Fudge needed Hammond organs, four voices, drums and advanced studio techniques to get: highly melodramatic bullshit.

Theoretically it should work. A folksinger (Jim McKendree) with good songs, backed by violin, guitar and bass should be dynamite. They all press their fuzztones at the appropriate times, use a theramin and all look spaced-out serious about their music. Unfortunately, they're all mediocre at what they do and the theramin is used only for a rising swoosh in a few songs in exactly the same spots every time. Often, they do some good

tunes by established writers (Arlo Guthrie, Dylan) but somehow make them sound just as bland and muddling as their own compositions.

The act is well-rehearsed and polished but the automatically pretty texture has a dangerously soporific effect. Their volatile instrumentation (fiddle, 2 guitars, bass) has hitherto been used right only in country and bluegrass and it doesn't look like McKendree Spring will do it for folk-rock.

Ungano's offering last Wednesday and Thursday of Raven and Terry Reid was considerably better. Raven started their set slow the night I was there and worked a long blues jam (in G, if you're interested) into "I Can't Quit You." At first the balance was jumbled with the bass so loud and with so much bottom that it just reverberated underfoot. They managed to slowly infuse their straight blues, though, with a choppy jazz texture as the guitarist and organist answered each other back and forth.

The guitarist, keyboard man and singer emerged as really classy musicians. One of the best features of the guitarist is the understatement of his style. He holds back and just plays a suggestion, quickening it in his solos with an expansion of those first simple lines. On their closing number, "Feeling Good," he played through the organist's Leslie speaker cabinet to get that nice quacky sound.

The keyboard man got a tinny honky-tonk piano sound by running through an amp set for all trebles. His blues piano was really tasty and he also did good organ work, though it was often too distorted. Raven's singer has a strong voice a la David Clayton Thomas. He excels at phrasing, giving the band a large chunk of their sound.

The rhythm section really kept Raven on the ground. The bass player's tone is ill-defined and he played so loud that it was hard to distinguish just what he was doing. Their music needs a tight open sound from the drums, not the standard boogaloo beat they have. The drummer is just too loose and wishy-washy to provide them with the power to excite.

There were some nice moments, particularly the first and last songs, but the material from their Columbia

album sandwiched in between just didn't justify itself. If the last tune, their new single "Feeling Good," is an indication of their direction, better days are coming for them.

Terry Reid is a really exceptional natural singer who strongly resembles Van Morrison (although less disciplined) and Jose Feliciano (although more hard rock) with a stronger, more gravelly voice than either. Around that voluminous voice is built a hard rock kingdom of Reid's guitar playing, a Hammond organist who also plays a Fender Rhodes keyboard bass with his left hand and a drummer with a lot of drums and little imagination.

I had a lot of fun watching them and the groupies' antics on the floor angling around for the few catches off-stage (Mitch Mitchell and a couple of Spooky Toths).

Terry Reid has the magnetism and personal finesse that make a star. His ranting scating screaming style seems to come from the bottom of his guts. And anyone who screams so much with such relish makes you want to shout a little yourself. I liked his version of Ray Charles' "I Got News For You Baby" and he even did up "Band Bang" nicely.

Reid's guitar playing isn't so spectacular. He could well use some good solos to underline his singing. The organist played some nice bass and lead parts at the same time, but taken separately they were pretty ordinary. The drummer hasn't got the best of time, in fact he's about as dynamic as mud in spite of a double drum set and a vigorous visual style.

The trio falls back on the strength of the arrangements which have a lot of drama and dynamics. They play a lot of strong figures with the whole group whacking it out in unison.

The New York club scene last week (Savoy Brown at Salvation and Tyrannosaurus Rex at the Cafe AuGoGo, in addition to what I've reviewed) was entirely minor luminaries -- groups just beginning to be heard. Although they aren't as rewarding to see as more developed talents, it's good that clubs like these exist to give the lesser-loved a chance. And then you can always say you knew them when.