

CLUB SCENES

By Johanna Schier

I love John Sebastian and that's about all anyone who sees him perform can say about it. He is one of those rare artists who can transmit himself whole through his work so that to see/hear him is to touch and know him. And to know him as you do through his songs and the anecdotes he tells on stage is to make contact with a thoroughly charming and lovable human being. He is all soft (about the edges) like a painting by Watteau, but if you notice his icy eyes you will see him taking in everything going down around him no matter how veiled. That paradox of easygoing dreamy warmth and honed perceptions is the central quality of his music as well.

John has been at the Bitter End for the last two weeks, finishing up on the 30th. I saw his first set the first night and by the time this comes out I will certainly have gone back for more. He came out like a magic man in white denim pastel-tye-dyed clothes, struck a chord on his guitar and began to sing a capella: "How have you been my darling children while I was away in the west?" This greeting to his audience exchanged en masse as he went on to say that although we are strangers "I feel that I know you by the way that you greet me and offer to feed me and eagerly ask if I'll stay for a rest... I wish I had presents for each of your smiles," he sings and apologizes that he's been traveling light but offers various exotica picked up in his adventuring. There are beads from an Egyptian princess given by the loveliest of ladies, a turtle from the Long Island expressway whose home had been covered with concrete and a European guitar string "thin for the fourth string and fat for the third string" but kept just in case he'd use it one day.

The song set the mood for the evening. It was as though each song was an oddity he'd picked up along his way and now gave to us, the smiling strangers. He told fabulous stories about each song. "Pow," for example, was the theme song for a movie of that title. He was given a deadline and thrust into a studio to do the music for the whole score. Writing a song revolving around the word POW was totally uninspiring and under pressure became impossible. When did the song come? In the cab going up to deliver.

There were lots of Spoonful songs like "Lovin' You," "She's A Lady" and "Darlin' Be Home Soon" and lots of new songs like "The Room Nobody Lives In" about an unused room longing for a human moment of its own which he sang to pump organ and "Boredom" about being alone in a motel in a one-channel town. My favorite of the new songs is "I Had a Dream". He didn't know what it was about when he wrote it, and only felt he understood after the Woodstock festival: "What a wondrous dream it was/ I dreamed we all were all right/ Happy in a land of Oz... All of the players were playing together/ All of the heavies were light as a feather/ All I remember is a feeling tomorrow/ And as I recall the rest will just follow."

It may be a little hard to imagine someone you know from a group going out on his

own as Sebastian has done and coming off whole. It's true that it takes strong talent to do without the context of bass, drums and electricity when you're used to it. Sebastian is accompanying himself on guitar--some electric and some acoustic-- and he plays such fullness of chords, bass lines and little lead diddles simultaneously that you never miss a band.

His set must have lasted an hour and a half but it was so packed with experience and so totally absorbing that it felt like no time had passed. It was as though he took the audience in his arms and then gently let them go.

Van Morrison has one hell of a voice and he knows how to use it like ocean flowing over craggy rocks. He also writes a flowing gutsy sort of song that lets him improvise astonishing vocals (like "to love the love that loves to love" in "Madam George"). With the crust in his voice and the meat in his tunes, Morrison cooks up some tasty records. He started out from England with his group Them, getting hits off "Here Comes the Night" and "Gloria" (the national anthem of auditioning groups in clubs all across the country). He later struck paydirt

like a huge limp of inanimate matter while singing. Being in complete possession of his faculties, an audience expects him to reach out to them; to care about his music and extend that caring to them. Morrison really needs a vigorous style to go with his thrusting vocal. A male singer in rock needs arrogance to move the masses; Morrison doesn't even appear to have pride. He won't look at anyone even when making introductions and as anyone who took Speech 200 knows, eye contact is the first rule in reaching an audience. Besides all that, he's short freckled and fat -- hardly a heart throb to begin with.

While Morrison doesn't set me on fire as a performer, I still like his basic qualities of singing and songs well enough to go and see him. When I did, at Ungano's last week I noticed a great improvement in his band since last May at the Felt Forum. At the FF he showed up with a rhythm guitarist, bassist and drummer who were either terrible or had never even heard the tunes before, or both. The music was so weak in contrast to his singing that there was very little enjoyment in listening. Now he is performing with an electric pianist and two reeds, who



Van Morrison at Ungano's

photo: Snyder

along with "Brown Eyed Girl" and most recently recorded a really lovely wispy-hard album, ASTRAL WEEKS.

While he comes across forcefully on records, his stage presence is regrettably negative. He's been playing clubs in New York lately -- early in the summer the Felt Forum's Something Else and in the last few weeks the Cafe Au Gogo and Ungano's. Although he's singing as uniquely and soulfully as on any record, he totally fails to elicit any excitement as a performer.

If he were blind or crippled it would probably be all right. The hearts of his audiences would go out to him and it wouldn't matter that he stood motionless, expressionless

double on clarinet, English horn and tenor and alto sax, (in addition to a bassist and drummer).

They have a lot of work to do, but if they stay together it could develop into a strong exciting support for Morrison's voice. There would be only one addition needed to the group for that -- a good lead guitarist. The music moves along quite nicely until Morrison takes a solo and then it falls apart. I'll be interested to see how this back up group develops for him and whether Morrison's stage style ever catches up to his inner talents. He must be the epitome of Dick Farina's, "Hard Lovin' Loser".