

FROM MANHATTAN it's a journey that is best forgotten, but once you're inside the Brooklyn Academy of Music it's a nice place to visit. And even nicer to hear music, see a movie, or get the oracle from your friendly neighborhood poet. Three evenings there of good poetry, music, and films were for the benefit of the Chelsea Free Theatre Centre. The program that tickled my cultural bone was last Saturday and it included the Band, Allen Ginsberg, "Don't Look Back," and "Yellow Submarine"—a hipster's dream if I ever did see one.

The Joy of Cooking "direct from People's Park in Berkeley" was the first act in the ornate, stately concert hall (films went on simultaneously in another theatre in the building). The five-piece band is typical of San Francisco's continuing sound in their meandering one-chord tunes and stoned out fuzzy jams that go on and on. The Orphan-Annie-headed girl singer does a Joplinsque mongrel raga style and plays rhythm guitar. Sleek dark hair and pale skin, the other girl has the air of a satisfied user of macrobiotics. She played excellent baroque piano (inasmuch as the one chord allowed) and nonexistent lead guitar. The bass player was accurate but barely audible. The drummer and conga player did endless variations on the one bleached fatback four-four that ever leaked through to San Francisco.

The main fault with this group was in the tunes. They are a competent West Coast group by any standard, but if you heard one song, you'd heard them all. It is impossible to jam on one chord for 15 minutes at a stretch in the wooden rhythmic manner they do and maintain life and validity. The soloing instrument needs to transcend the time a la free jazz while the rhythm section supplies a shifting bed of colors and textures for the soloist to dance on. Lacking that, they were stifling: cooking none too joyfully. Second set it was much more together and the audience really went with them, but the basic flaws were inherent.

Before the stage hands could finish clearing up and setting up for Ginsberg, and while the house lights still encouraged milling and talking, out he wandered in old denim jacket and jeans. Setting the harmonium and notebooks of poetry on his podium, Ginsberg started intoning a Hare Krishna mantra in that wild ancient chant-style he has, accompanied by droning chords on the harmonium. This startling sight and sound delight settled the audience back down as a spotlight was hastily turned on him and the hall dimmed to dark. Ginsberg's mantras have a sobbing religious drama. he throws back his head and really wails. I could listen all night.

Asking to have the lights back

in the house so that he could "see where I am," he launched his poems. Almost all were topical: Vietnam, Chicago, Nixon, air pollution, bullets, Reader's Digest, and the New York Times. And orgasms. The poems articulated what we'd all like to say about those topics in the uncanny lyric way that the poet has. Many lines were applauded on political grounds but most on tracks of the heart. Many views were given of our cities and countries as from a cloud: the planet crawling with tiny organisms.

One poem on going to Baltimore from Albany in a plane asked Poe if he'd conceived of the smoking red horror of the Southern city. Another touched

on the children with their "poisoned glands and DDT livers, hallucinating tiny Vietnams on tv." To the military genius who admonishes about the war "we're in this too deep to pull out," Ginsberg thunders, "Waiting for an orgasm?"

He reads in a choppy voice laying phrases surrealistically on each other, left-arm and left-index finger waving, then suddenly speaks in everyday voice ("What the hell?"). In Chicago stories the tear gas fumes "drifted up to the Vice-President/ naked in the bathroom/ on the toilet/ taking a shit/ weeping/ Who wants to be president of the garden of Eden?" and "God is baby blue/ the original face you see/sees you."

One short poem: "Kiss ass is the art of peace/ America will have to kiss ass mother earth/ white will have to kiss ass black/ For peace and for pleasure/ Kiss ass."

He closed the set with another mantra.

For his second show, Ginsberg opened with a mantra used for the consecration of grass. The imagery, as he explained it, concerns a goddess with her head cut off drinking her own blood. He read one long poem called "September 26, 1969"—that was (among other things) the day Nixon made his speech assuring us the Moratorium would affect him in no way. Perhaps it is the all-time expression of the anger, anguish, and frustration of watching the

apple-pie American destruction of the earth and air and the creatures thereof. He describes the perpetrators of this greedy rape as "a communion of bum magicians." And "communism is a nine letter word used by magicians who have the wrong formula for turning earth into gold." This poem, is one of the greats.

The Band remain for me one of the most significant groups in rock and a sure antidote to revivalism. Their high level of musical expertise and tight-knit group consciousness signal a major artery streaming out of rock. Good time music like theirs used to be slipshod in execution. With polish, proficiency, and rock criticism came a (sometimes) deadly seriousness. The Band prove that you can have fun, kid around in your music, and still play rings around nearly everyone else.

They did the same set at both the 8 and 11.30 shows, right down to the two encores. "King Harvest" started them off to cheers and "Slippin' and Slidin'" finished it off to thunderous applause. The last set's audience kept that up after the second encore for a solid, unwavering 10 minutes of cheering, stomping, and egging for more. The Band had gone right out to their car and were half-way to Manhattan by that time.

The program was mostly material from "Big Pink": "Wheel's On Fire," "Caledonia Mission," "Chest Fever," "The Weight," "Tears of Rage," and "I Shall Be Released." From the new album there was also "Cripple Creek," "Unfaithful Servant," and "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down." The first line of each song was cheered. Practically everything got a standing ovation second set, and the nice guitar work from Robbie was punctuated by ohs and ahs.

As a performance group the Band was quite bashful. Since I saw them last May at their first appearance, they've loosened up noticeably. When someone yelled "Play All Night!", Manuel joked back "Send out for sandwiches." But they're still shy and formal for a rock group; however, endearingly so. Most retiring of all is Garth Hudson, who is just beginning to emerge for me as the genius he really is. Listen for example to the accordion sound of the organ at the back of "Tears Of Rage." He hides out behind his fortress of Leslie speakers, Hammond organ and Clavinette on top, coloring the music with brilliant madness.

Although they have avoided personal charisma publicity, they have the individual appeal and group magic that makes stars. Judging from the quantity and the fanatical quality of the response to them that night, the cult of worship is already well-advanced. There is that of the spell of the enchanter in their performances. They have a way of making everything come into sharp focus, realer than real, especially themselves.

—Johanna Schier