

riffs



SETS PEOPLE PLAY.

IF YOU HAD VENTURED into Kenny's Castaways the six days leading up to and including April Fool's Day, you would have been fooled—but nicely. For opening the advertised show of Danny Kalb and Sweet Dirt was the total surprise of Joel Zoss. His performance had the attributes of a diamond in the rough, but the gem was there gleaming for anyone who cared to listen.

A rebellious sound system and

two stumbling sidemen were distractions but Zoss surmounted these obstacles to create a quiet spell with his rich voice and compelling songs. Dressed in blue with his acoustic guitar cradled in his lap, he sat in a straight-back chair, mostly too shy to look the audience in the eye. But the force of a unique personality, with all the magic and mystery and mischievousness of the classic troubadour, was easily communicated.

Zoss's untamed, expressive vocal style may remind some of early Dylan but in tonal quality he is most like Geoff Muldaur. His forte, though, is songwriting. Musically, the songs range from lilting ballads to driving blues with many interwoven influences from diverse styles. The melodies will haunt you. His lyrics are first-rate poetry, capable of standing on their own and moving you with elusive, evocative imagery.

There was humor in songs like "Radiator Blues" ("Let me come in and stand by your radiator for a little while/ I won't ask you to take your dress off"); sadness in "Goodbye Goodbye Goodbye" ("I gave my love a candle, a promise, and a lie/ I told her when my number comes up, wings will fill the sky/ Me I'm fixin' to die"); high spirits in "Down on the Levee" and low ones in "Sarah" ("Come and kiss me/ you don't know how to miss me/ the wind's in the chimney/ it's cold and the darkness scares me"). He closed with his best-known tune, "Too Long at the Fair," which has been recorded by Bonnie Raitt.

In my opinion, Joel Zoss will emerge as a giant among the songwriters of the '70s. His next New York appearance couldn't be too soon. Watch for him.

—Johanna Schier