



Test Flyte Downunder

"The tour itinerary didn't say how far apart the last two towns were or how we were travelling up. When we found it meant a six-hour drive before the concert we got up early — it was dark — and took off for the airport: a bleary-eyed Roger McGuinn arriving in Auckland on a bleak, rain-lashed Saturday morning.

The recent New Zealand Tour by former Byrds, Roger McGuinn, Chris Hillman and Gene Clark, along with Poco drummer George Grantham, constituted not just another reunion, but the first performances of a newly formed group. On return to the States they will begin recording an album in late July under the name Flyer. (The permanence of Grantham's tenure with the band is not yet known although he will definitely be on the album.)

The original and obvious moniker for the band is considered unsuitable because, as Hillman put it, "It just wouldn't be the Byrds without David and Michael." Moreover, any new recording under that name would remind audiences of the unhappy '72 reunion. About that album McGuinn and Hillman are blunt. It seems their enthusiasm for the future allows them an easy candour about the past.

Hillman: "I hated that '72 album. It was rushed. We needed 3 months just to get to know each other again. I think we all went in there with songs but we saved the good ones

for our own projects. I know I did. Gene had some good ones though."

McGuinn: "I listened to it again and it's not as bad as I thought, although my 'Born to Rock and Roll' is a disaster."

A corporate title of surnames for the new group is also to be avoided "rather than risk another Souther-Hillman-Furay escapade."

That ill-fated '73 attempt at a supergroup is now dismissed by Hillman as "the ingredients of a great cake which just didn't cook. We never worked together; just on each other's songs." Yet Hillman speaks fondly of his other post-Byrd outfits, the Flying Burrito Brothers and Manassas. His relationship with Stephen Stills in the latter band was "and is, very close. We have a good friendship." In the New Zealand concerts Hillman featured two numbers he wrote with Stills.

Looking back further, Hillman laughs in recalling when he, McGuinn and the original Byrds first stormed world charts with "Mr Tambourine Man." "We really weren't sure if we liked the song at first." Nonetheless that record virtually made them All-American heroes, the first group to break the Beatles-led, British stranglehold of the charts.

From that beginning, the Byrds' success grew as they progressed from the 'folk-rock' genre they had founded to developing the 'psychedelic sound' on such fine albums as *Fifth Dimension* and *Younger Than Yesterday*. Then came the masterful *Notorious Byrd Brothers* which, following the untimely depar-

ture of David Crosby, was virtually a co-operative venture between McGuinn and Hillman. To this day they regard it as one of their finest moments. "We had a real good creative rapport there. Rog and I wrote two good songs in one evening."

In his enthusiasm, Hillman compares their current working relationship to the *Notorious* period. "We recently sat down and wrote a new song real easy. We have that same feeling as then."

McGuinn and Hillman originally parted company in '68 after disagreements following the classic *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, an album which had again seen the Byrds pioneering a new field. Today, any past friction is long forgotten as they joke about the split.

Hillman: "Rog deserted me and left me in the street."

McGuinn: "No, he left me to go off with Gram Parsons."

Hillman: "We invited you."

McGuinn: "That's true, but I wasn't into country enough to do that."

If further assurance of their rejuvenated harmony were needed, one could note that in concert McGuinn proudly introduced two *Sweetheart* numbers — including a glorious acapella rendition of Dylan's "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere" — as "from one of our best albums."

They see no dilemma in still performing old Byrds' numbers in a band which is trying to establish a new identity.

McGuinn: "We'll always play Byrds' songs. After all they're ours. Like Paul McCartney still plays 'Yesterday' and he's Wings."

Hillman: "People have got to have that reference point. But we're no nostalgia show. We've limited the old songs to 4 or 5 and people's reactions to all the new ones have been real good."

Indeed, the new songs (on one hearing anyway) are all impressive and bode well for the coming album. As well as the band, concerts included short solo spots featuring material from members' individual recordings: Hillman's from *Clear Sailing*, McGuinn's from *Cardiff Rose*, Clark's being unreleased here.

Individually or collectively, off-stage and on, their demeanour is relaxed. There is little attempt to present the image of 'A Rock and Roll Star'. Says McGuinn, "It's just a gig." He grins and adds, "It's pretty neat though."

Hillman: "We're older now. I just feel I'm a musician. I'm not sure anymore what the 'Star' end of it means. Limousines and private airplanes?"

The irony is heavy. This interview was conducted in a packed Honda after a turbulent early morning flight in an Air N.Z. Friendship. A wet and slightly dazed Hillman described the trip as "Jim Croce Airlines", while McGuinn thought it rather complemented his "punk rock dream" of the night before.

The June 10th *Ready to Roll* appearance was taped the day they arrived in New Zealand "wrecked from 15 hours on an airplane."

McGuinn: "I was such a trooper, I wanted to do it."

Hillman: "He talked us into it. Somebody said we looked mean on T.V. We were just tired."

McGuinn, a confessed space and technology freak, has always been a sucker for film and T.V. studios. "I don't want to be a director or anything but I like to hang around and watch them do it." On T.V. he wore a *Star Wars* T-shirt. "I've seen the film 7 times. I've got some of it on video." He's recently co-written a film script, although as yet has no plans for its production, and has had a few acting lessons. "I'm moderately interested but I've realised now that movie actors don't have the same liberty as musicians, especially when you get to our stage. Actors get told what to do all the time and we don't."

Hillman: "As your credibility grows you get more chance to call the shots. We have pretty much artistic control."

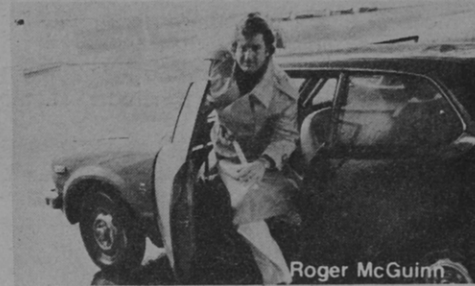
McGuinn: "And movie actors never get the audience response until some guy has cut their part up. They don't see the final thing until it's out. We have a large say in the recordings and we get immediate gratification from a concert audience."

Gratification indeed if the Auckland concert showed a typical response. Despite an atrocious sound system (for which the promoters should be shot), broken guitar strings and George Grantham being ill, they received a roaring acclaim. People tried to dance but the security guards, aware of the inevitable depravity ensuing from such activity, stopped it smartly. Of course the classic hits would invariably draw rapturous applause from such an audience; the maturing rockers and 'ageing hippies' McGuinn had predicted. But Hillman was right; there's more to it than nostalgia. This band was not a bunch of tired legends trading worn-out harmonies on a past decade's fame. (Beach Boys please note.) While things may appear casual, the ease is deceptive. Vocally, they are as strong as ever — Grantham's backing work is an asset — and instrumentally they still kick it, not just as experienced professionals, but with a rock 'n' roll spirit which is very much alive.

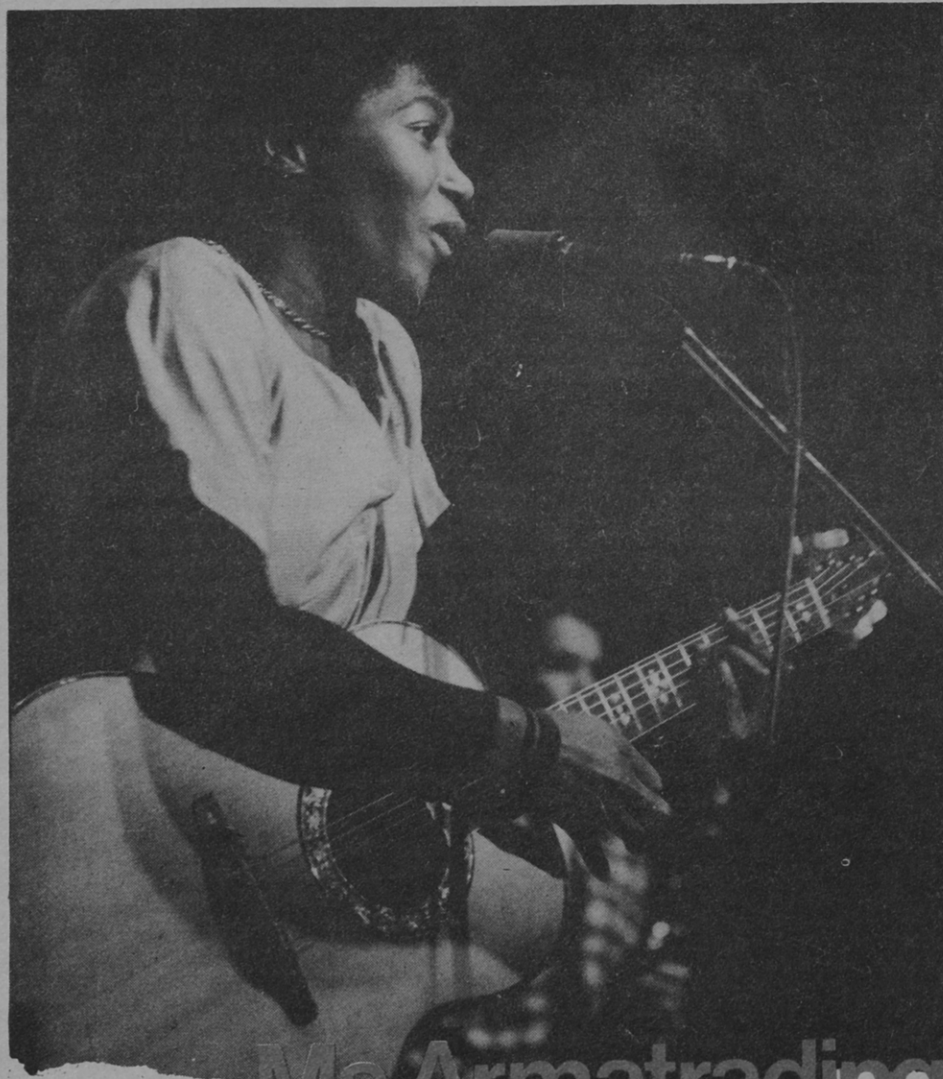
It may be a gig but, as the man said, it's a pretty neat one.

Peter Thomson

(with thanks to Mary who arranged the interview and drove the car)



Roger McGuinn



Ms Armatrading In Concert

Reaction to Joan Armatrading's Auckland concert, both in the Town Hall itself and in the press, was unreservedly favourable. Admittedly, she had the biggest head-start from her audience that I have seen for any performer, but it still takes a great performance to live up to the kind of expectations that this crowd obviously had.

That she carried it off so well in the circumstances is a tribute to her own capabilities, because the band she used, apparently drawn from the middle ranks of the British session fraternity, did not manage to bring the same sparkle to her songs as the players on her albums. Instead, Armatrading was obliged to provide most of the drive and energy with her singing and guitar work. Guitarist Bill Hamm seemed especially out of place with his jazz fusion stylings in arrangements originally built around Jerry Donahue's tasteful interjections.

Generally, the band was competent enough, but it is a shame that the costs of touring this part of the world are starting to decree that artists bring a rather cheaper band than they would dare to step on stage with in Britain. Leo Sayer appeared here last month with a collection which was by all accounts less than he deserved, and Armatrading had to put a lot of work in to bring the best out of her musicians.

All this effort was masked behind a studied air of unconcern, mind you, a good example of how to hold the audience's attention with anti-stardom. The between-song introductions and anecdotes all came with a convincing amount of diffidence, and it was hard not to believe that they were spontaneous. The show never lagged, even though there were much longer gaps between songs than might normally be considered usual for a well-paced show.

Right from the beginning, she scored well with her audience of fans by opening with 'Down to Zero', and following it one song later with 'Show Some Emotion'. The strength of the songs, and of her singing, immediately reassured the audience. As the show went on, taking in large parts of the *Joan Armatrading* album, and almost all of *Show Some Emotion*, they gave more to the performer than any Auckland crowd I have ever seen. It is probably

more than coincidence that they were also the first Town Hall crowd I have seen with a majority of women in it. Although she denies any particular links with feminist groups, Armatrading is obviously aware of the amount of support she gets from that sector, and is prepared to acknowledge it on stage. In a long introduction she told a story of how she repulsed the unwanted attentions of a male admirer — to the obvious delight of much of the audience.

I don't know if supporting artist John Hanlon is not so aware of the inclinations of Armatrading's audience, or whether he is just bloody-minded, but he took his life in both hands when chatting amiably about having his 'lady' wash his dishes after him. He was greeted with the inevitable hisses. In fact, that was the strongest reaction he garnered from a set which had some interest added to it by the cocktail-lounge piano of fellow ad-man Mike Harvey. Like Lea Maalfrid's recent stint as an opening act, their performance proved that New Zealanders don't lack for musicianship, but rather urgency and confidence.

Armatrading showed what that kind of aggression can do for a show. By the time she finished her set with "Kissing and Huggin", she had worked the band up to full steam, and the audience to fever pitch and the demand for an encore was tremendous. I even had one neighbour sobbing at the thought that it might be all over. When Armatrading came back alone to play "Peace In Mind" at the piano, you could feel the relief run through the crowd, and the feeling peaked in another roar after "Back To The Night". Eventually, she re-emerged to finish with a rousing work-out on "Never Is Too Late", with the band slotting surprisingly well into its reggae setting.

Reportedly, a huge proportion of overseas acts that play Auckland use stories of the sterile audiences here to frighten their children. Auckland crowds are in danger of being labelled plain indifferent, but the general casting off of the big city *sang froid* for Joan Armatrading gives the lie to those who would maintain that the condition was incurable. All it takes is a touch of genius.

Francis Stark