

Rock: The 50's Come Back

By WILLIAM KLOMAN

BEGINNING with the vogue for the styles of the '20's which struck sometime in the fall of 1964, American popular culture has been steadily re-consuming recent history at the rate of about one decade a year. 1964 was when Susan Sontag wrote her essay on the *recherché* sensibility that was then called camp but has since become nameless because it is pervasive and no longer special.

In the music industry, the reconsumption process is showing up in the form of parody. Pop groups have forsaken the electronic soup the Beatles lured them into and are busily redigesting the remnants of the fabulous 50s as well as attempting to search out their own musical roots. Bob Dylan's solo trip to Nashville to record "John Wesley Harding" started the latter trend. The back-up band he originally hired to record with him was left behind in Woodstock, and have since cut a superslick "purist" album of their own called "Music From Big Pink." It was reviewed favorably in these pages a few weeks ago.

Now the Byrds, who got their start as interpreters of Dylan's music, have joined the search for roots. In spite of the fact that the personnel of the Byrds seems to change almost monthly, Jim McGuinn (who has changed his name to Roger for religious reasons) has managed to make them one of the most professional and dependable groups in popular music.

From the start, the Byrds have provided unpretentious—and sometimes inspired—distillations of current trends. "The Notorious Byrd Brothers," for example, was one of the best products of last years' psychedelic sweepstakes and is said to have saved more than one acid-head from screaming paranoia. The Byrds are nothing if not soothing.

* Their latest album, *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* (Columbia CS 9670), is an excellently produced, urbanized version of old country and western motifs. Two Dylan songs, "You Ain't Going Nowhere" and "Nothing Was Delivered," are treated with characteristic and confident tastefulness. Woody Guthrie's socialist ode to "Pretty Boy Floyd" nicely complements Gram Parsons' wistful commentary in "One Hundred Years From Now."

People who grew up listening to Hank Williams will miss the rough edge of down-home grit in the vocals, which are more Southern Maryland roadhouse than true bluegrass, but the simplicity and honesty of the music make it the best country and western album of the recent avalanche.

The Secret Life of Harpers Bizarre (Warner Bros.-Seven Arts, WS 1739) is, on the other hand, neither very simple nor very honest. The

group has obviously fallen under the spell of Van Dyke Parks, a much-praised young composer whose music recalls wind-up Victrolas and playing dress-up in the attic on rainy Saturday afternoons.

"The Secret Life" follows a sweetly nostalgic album called "Anything Goes," but this time the Bizarre has gone too far. The effect is startling, somewhat like that of the computer HAL in "2001" when he sings an infantile version of "Daisy" as he flips out.

Harpers Bizarre has always skirted the boundaries of camp. This time they jump all the way in. Woolworth's cowboy boots first. With their balalaikas and flutes flapping in the breeze, they have become the Melachrino Strings of the '60's. They have the field all to themselves until the Vienna Boys Choir decides to cut an album called "Sunday in New York."

* Big Brother and the Holding Company, an Albert Grossman property, has just issued an album called *Cheap Thrills* (Columbia, KCS 9700). "Cheap Thrills" is, in effect, a stereophonic minstrel show, and probably the most insulting album of the year. It is Big Brother's second album. The first was for a record company named Mainstream and it bombed. Some claim the Mainstream people released it to punish Big Brother for contractual vagaries. "Cheap Thrills," however, was released by Columbia in a flurry of hyperbole, and is destined for commercial success.

It's not surprising that the underground press should have fallen in love with Big Brother at first sight. The group, after all, is the embodiment of the hippy fantasy: middle-class white kids with long blonde hair pretending to be black. The whole thing comes off as bad parody, a kind of plastic soul that lacks the humor and relative integrity of, say, the old Amos 'n' Andy shows.

Big Brother seems to be driven by the same confused impulse that sends East Side matrons streaming up to 125th Street on the "A" train to have their hair kinked Afro by Mr. Harold. It's a brotherly fantasy to adopt in these troubled times, but it just won't do.

Every cut on the album rings false, down to the choir music on the last band which is supposed to make people talk about the album. The falsity would be excusable if so much of the music weren't boring and second-rate. The record may be intended as a sort of original cast album to help people recall the visual excitement of seeing lead singer Janis Joplin do her jumping-around number in person. She is sexy on-stage, but the voice suffers badly when it is separated from the body.

Among other problems, the musicians in the group have some very peculiar ideas about rhythm. The depth of

feeling that supports authentic blues music and makes its intentional imprecision exciting, simply isn't there. In its place are screeches and arbitrary twangs geared to listeners who can't distinguish between sexual yearning and prickly heat.

Janis Joplin may, as some claim, be the most magnificent white blues singer of the decade, but on this album she isn't very good. Here and there are enough indications of an interesting vocal quality to suggest that if she had any idea what she was doing she might be able to sell a song. Her voice, when it comes through the shouting, is cool and fluid. She has the equipment of a blues singer, but follows the instincts of an untrained belter. Part of Janis's thing at the moment is not to know what she is doing on the theory that if she did she would spoil the emotional experience of performing.

* If the people who claim to be deeply moved when Janis does her thing would listen closely, they would realize that what she has given us so far is about as funky as Rosalind Russell doing her honky-tonk turn. There are chicks like her in bars all over the Southwest, who sing along with jukeboxes and dance with soldiers for beers. Like Tiny Tim, Janis is an authentic slice of mid-century Americana but, for the present, a major talent she is not.

My quarrel isn't with Big Brother and the Holding Company. They are a group with extremely limited musical ability but not without a kinky sort of charm on the order of Homer and Jethro. There are thousands of such groups around who have found an audience and work steadily. What is annoying is that so much of the national press should slavishly jump on every underground bandwagon that comes along and turn people like the Big Brother group into mass phenomena.

Columbia Records says that Janis Joplin has had no



David Gahr

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musical training. One night at a party she just started singing, and discovered herself. Just like that. The story fulfills the hippy myth that there's a knock-out artist hidden in each of our breasts, if only we'd let it out and start singing or writing poems or whatever. The more esoteric the skill, the more likely each of us is to have it. The more incompetent the current standards of criticism in the particular field, the more likely the hidden talent can be commercially exploited.

"Cheap Thrills" is already assured of selling the million dollars worth of records required for a gold record. That automatically makes the Big Brothers group important musical artists. The moral of the story seems to be that the next time some little kid tells his mother he wants to take music lessons, the lady is advised to reply, "Forget it, baby. Get yourself a press agent instead."