

MIKE McCLELLAN

Where does he go
from here?

Mike McClellan's name has become a household word in the New England region. In 1963 he landed in the cold country to learn what being a teacher was all about. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* (186-75) he described it as the most important years of his life: "It was my first opportunity to get involved with music away from my home life. . .listening to. . .Doc Watson. . .Rober McGuinn. . .blues". Music, that eternal temptress, lured him away from books and early morning eye-strain, into his development as one of Australia's finest singer/songwriters. But not before he went into the country towns and taught, because as Mike describes it, being a solo artist in Australia is one of the hardest lots to befall a man.

It's called payin' de dues, and it means the long slow grind of bars, folk taverns and one-night stands. Australia has had its own legend of hotted up holdens/dances/this ain't rock an roll/this is rockin' crutch and the deafmutes. Which is great when you're fourteen and horny or thirteen with yer new levis and hairdo. It's an education. When you graduate to saying "far out and wow" with some authority, you wanna play it a little more cool. You know about Dylan, you've heard Springsteen, slit yer wrists over Cohen, wept at Joni Mitchell, confessed to Jesse Winchester and discovered that Australia has its own singer/songwriters like Mike McClellan.

The record companies, bless their pointed little heads, began waking up to this in the early seventies. The solo artist was about to get his chance. He didn't have to dress in cowboy boots and yodel "Pub With No Beer", he didn't have to squeeze into a suit to appear on television, belting out "My Way", or shake hands with Gordon Boyd and go into the orchestrated bow tie of "Climb Every Mountain". He didn't have to have a pretty face, satin and glitter, and wheedle his way through two-chord songs about baby/baby/oh my baby. No, he or she (yes, women were being recognised as more than cabaret shrimp cocktails — Jeanne Lewis, Margaret Roadknight and Marion Henderson have seen to this) could actually write and record songs that were original, perceptive and meaningful.

In 1972 Mike McClellan recorded his first album. It received critical acclaim, but little promotion. Mike explains it this way: "The record company ATA did nothing to promote it. They did manage to put out a poster three months after it had been released." That was the year I first saw Mike in concert. He was supporting English folk group Pentangle, and I was immediately struck by the warmth and excellence of his songs. His performance revealed to me why he is acknowledged as probably the finest acoustic guitarist in Australia.

Since '72 I have had the opportunity to see Mike perform at least once a year. Each time I have been more and more impressed by his growth as a solo artist. He makes a point of playing Armidale at least once a year, because it renews his roots and gives him the chance of returning something to the town that provided him with much of his initial impetus. Last year's concerts were a tribute to his ever-increasing popularity. Promoters were forced to add an additional concert to his itinerary when the first one sold out weeks in advance.

At the time, Mike's second album had just been released. "Ask Any Dancer" compared more favorably with international artists' work. Songs like "Saturday Night", "Come Up To My Room Tonight" and "One Man Band" were absolute gems. To top it off "Rock an' Roll Lady", with its superb hook chorus, was in the top 40. There is a saying in the music industry: break with the single and you make it with the album. Both happened. The single was a hit,



the album went gold.

His first concert is well worth talking about. Local group, Butch, Liz and Duncan (with Steven Kiely sitting in on piano) had in the preceding year built up a large following. This was due to their beautiful songs (and I do not use that in the cliché). Their trademark, as a group, was the wall of sound harmony. On songs like "Poor John", "Rally for the wounded" and "Leaving You" they sent shivers up your spine. Their whole concert performance hinged around the song. If that didn't come off, everything else fell away. On this night they turned on their most mediocre set of the year.

When Mike McClellan came out, the audience was appreciative, yes, but receptive, no. Within ten minutes he had them on his side. It was the mark of a true professional — the experience of twelve years on the road shone through. Mike was heard to say after the concert that the audience was one of the hardest he had ever worked with. The Sunday concert was a different kettle of fish. Butch, Liz and Duncan turned in one of the most stunning sets I have seen them play. Starting with their madcap political satire "Spotlight" (this had gone right over the head of the previous night's audience), they proceeded to weave their spell. Playing original compositions to an audience programmed on the hop machine can be a hazardous occupation, but by the time Duncan moved into "Rally for the wounded" evoking the decline and fall of the British Empire the group had well and truly proved the quality of their undertaking.

McClellan's set was simply a confirmation of his ability. His performance is always in keeping with the temperament of his songs. From moody introspection to the simple joy of a song like "Me and Petunia" he commands your attention.

So here we are in '76 and Mike McClellan is about to play his annual Armidale concert. His latest album, "Until the song is done" has received rave reviews; I personally consider it to be the best thing he's done; his songs are being recorded by international artists; and Mike himself, is off to America to record and perform. As his new single, "Carry Me", puts it, "America, I'm restless/haunted by your smile/I think I see you/holding out your hand./So often I have stood here/looking out to sea/But I see so much/I don't understand."

If you want to see one of the finest songwriters to emerge from Australia in the past twenty years, I recommend you to truck on down to Austin Dining Hall at eight o'clock this Saturday night, April 10th. It will be well worth the journey.

Terry McArthur.

Terry McArthur. "Mike McClellan: Where Does He Go Now?"
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