Bob Dylan: A Distinctive Folk-Song Stylist

20-Year-Old Singer Is Bright New Face at Gerde's Club

By ROBERT SHELTON

A bright new face in folk music is appearing at Gerde's Folk City. Although only 20 years old, Bob Dylan is one of the most distinctive stylists to play in a Manhattan cabaret in months.

Resembling a cross between a choir boy and a beatnik, Mr. Dylan has a cherubic look and a mop of tousled hair he partly covers with a Huck Finn black corduroy cap. His clothes may need a bit of tailoring, but when he works his guitar, harmonica or piano and composes new songs faster than he can remember them, there is no doubt that he is bursting at the seams with talent.

Mr. Dylan's voice is anything but pretty. He is consciously trying to recapture the rude beauty of a Southern field hand musing in melody on his porch. All the "husk and bark" are left on his notes and a searing intensity pervades his songs.

Slow-Motion Mood

Mr. Dylan is both comedian and tragedian. Like a vaudeville actor on the rural circuit, he offers a variety of droll musical monologues: "Talking Bear Mountain" lampoons the overcrowding of an excursion boat, "Talking New York" satirizes his troubles in gaining recognition and "Talking Havah Nagilah" burlesques the folk-music craze and the singer himself.

In his serious vein, Mr. Dylan seems to be performing in a slow-motion film. Elasticized phrases are drawn out until you think they may snap. He rocks his head and body, closes his eyes in reverie and seems to be groping for a word or a mood, then resolves the tension benevolently by finding the word and the mood.

He may mumble the text of "House of the Rising Sun" in a scarcely understandable growl or sob, or clearly enunciate the poetic poignancy of a Blind Lemon Jefferson blues: "One kind favor I ask of you—See that my grave is kept clean."

Bob Dylan

Mr. Dylan's highly personalized approach toward folk song is still evolving. He has been sopping up influences like a sponge. At times, the drama he aims at is off-target melodrama and his stylization threatens to topple over as a mannered excess.

But if not for every taste, his music-making has the mark of originality and inspiration, all the more noteworthy for his youth. Mr. Dylan is vague about his antecedents and birthplace, but it matters less where he has been than where he is going, and that would seem to be straight up.

If Mr. Dylan's pace is slow, the other half of the show at Folk City compensates for it. A whirlwind trio, the Greenbriar Boys, whips up some of the fastest, most tempestuous Bluegrass music this side of Nashville on eight cylinders and don blue collars and black string-bow ties. They join Mr. Herald, a leather-lunged tenor whose athletic, high-range country yodeling is a thing of wonder.

The fourth member of the group, a Virginia fiddler, Buddy nineteen strings. (Five strings on Bob Yellin's banjo, six on John Herald's guitar and eight on Ralph Rinzler's mandolin.)

Greenbriar Boys Are Also on Bill With Bluegrass Music

The Greenbriar Boys were the first Bluegrass band to play regularly in a New York night club. Messrs. Yellin and Rinzler take off their executive white collars each evening to Pendleton, appeared with them recently at the coffee-serving One Sheridan Square, but his Pentacostal Baptist upbringing forbids his working in, let alone patronizing, a saloon.

Bluegrass is a heady, vibrant sort of hoedown music, the contemporary successor to the old-time country tunes of the New Lost City Ramblers. As this trio performs it, Bluegrass is a springy, tightly arranged instrumental and vocal ensemble style that is frequently very funny and always fresh. The trio's large granary includes virtuoso pieces like "Rawhide," baleful ditties such as "Farewell, Amelia Earhart, First Lady of the Air" and gospel admonitions on the order of "We Need a Whole Lot More of Jesus and a Lot Less Rock 'n' Roll."