Performances

Commander Cody
The Bottom Line
By Mitch Schneider

Maturity, finesse and creativity are often conspicuously absent from live performances these days, though Commander Cody and his Lost Planet Airmen, who have increasingly grown tighter through the years, successfully fill any current abyss of style, recently bringing the audience to its feet at the Bottom Line to a howling, clapping and stamping frenzy. The tight piece, hot country rock and roll aggregate, who hail from California, draw their material from, as well as presently write their own songs in the style of the Boogie Woogie 45’s and the greasy 50’s and render truly authentic Texas swing in a manner that never sounds derivative: their unmasked enthusiasm and refreshingly zany, redneck approach transcends the confines of nostalgia.

An unresolved problem encountered at their performances: you don't quite know who to watch; Cody, as custom has it, revels in his own drunkenness, spewing polished piano notes and makeup monologues (“Hot Rod Lincoln,” “That’s What I Like About the South” and “Cellblock No. 9”), sideman and sax extraordinaire Andy Stiles, finally gives free instrumental reign and who steals the show, carefully diodes his face with wild expressions, occasionally sticking his foot into his sax; singer Silly C. Farlow, while talented, has thankfully stepped out of the complete spotlight and humps and hogs like a greaser king; Ernie Hunter, your typical skin, jokingly counterpoints the band’s long-haired, redneck madness, and runs up and down the frets of his pedal steel, cranking out precious notes from the double octave; and guitarist/vocalist Bill Kirchen and John Tishy, hands shakin’ and fingers pointin’, mirthfully lecture about truck drivers, jails and lost kin’s women.

Their irresistible stage presence and unrivaled synchroniza-
tion, with each musician alertly stepping into the spotlight, inevitably transforms their concert into a well-scraped, night club revue, which works best in an atmosphere like the Bottom Line, rather than the concert halls they usually play as side of town.

Old favorites—“Beat Me Daddy Eight to the Bar,” “Lost in the Ozone” and “Daisy Lady Lou”—as well as songs from their recently released fifth album, were included in their air-compan-
sing repertoire in which the harmonic interplay of the pedal steel, lead guitar and fiddle built into musical sweeps.

If not enough, country singer Emmy Lou Harris (who formerly sang with the late Gram Parsons and currently has her own album) unexpectedly joined Cody’s crew on two songs, one of which was “Jamailelay.” My only gripe was that Hank Williams couldn’t attend.

Janis Ian
The Bottom Line
By Susan Abrams

An electric cowpunter would have done Larry Gatlin a world of good in speeding up his down-home tunes into frenzied-excitement-like narratives. Gatlin used to play with Kristofferson, and traces still linger. Gatlin doesn’t mumble the way his former lead man will, but Gatlin does string his song ideas along in concrete audience form, and one can almost visualize the participa-
tion marks. His images are laced with country romance and humor as he sings about ladies “who rob you the right way” in “Makin’ Blue’s Massage Parlour Blues,” and a traveling musician’s boot with road fever in “One to the Road.”

Gatlin has a beautifully sweet honey drawl of a voice that reminds one of Mickey Newbury’s “American Trigo-
ny” that included the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and in songs like “Heart,” “Penny Lane” he glides to high notes that would make Ray Charles choke. Add to this a strong resemblance to Mac Davis, and you have a performer who would be better suited for a more square, established gig, say, a summer T.V. show on channel 4, but who did come off with a lot more polish than most country opening acts.

You’d think that with all the years she’s spent in the business Janis Ian would have enough polish to shine a Vegas dance floor. Not so, the word in her case is poise, and this poise keeps her show from ever getting thick.

Few people go to see Janis Ian and “laugh” her music. Her audiences go prepared to get dutes this song with a very “please-don’t-laugh-at-me” look on her face. I can understand the feat, the songs lay bare all of her truest feelings, but nobody ever laughs. At song’s end, I turned around and my friend’s glances were fogged. Now, if Janis Ian can reach that old Starday, you know she has a rare and...

Photo by Mary Altshul

special talent.

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