

arts & entertainment

Chapin's album welcome change

By Douglas R. Weil

Had Harry Chapin been able to sustain the sensitive, somber and soul-baring insight into life that dominated his early work it seems certain he would have achieved star status by now.

Although his first two albums—*Heads and Tails* and *Sniper and Other Love Songs*—displayed this insight in brilliant fashion, his subsequent musical ventures have been nothing short of disappointing. As it is, Harry Chapin is little more than a cult hero.

Things began to take a turn for the worse with *Short Stories*. Chapin's third album, *Short Stories* showed a serious lack of sincerity and involvement with his music. A storyteller by nature, Chapin seemed to be lost in the throes of a prolonged writing block.

by the aging father of American blues. "Bluesman" tells the story not just through the lyrics but also through the instrumental interplay.

Chapin has filled the song with considerable dialogue between "the kid" (Chapin) and the bluesman (John Wallace), along with engaging bits of humor sprinkled in. "Bluesman" ranks right alongside Chapin's previous masterpiece—"Taxi," "Sniper" and "Better Place to be."

"I Wonder What Happened to Him" is a neurotic's neurotic love song. Here Chapin sings about a girl with a long line of forgotten romances and asks her how long it will be before "I, too, have disappeared like I've never been." Acoustic guitar, strings and moody cello add just the perfect instrumental touches.

"Country Dreams" examines how our dreams have a way of dissipating like so much dust. Here the fictional dream was simple—live a contented life in the country with his loved ones.

The problem with "Country Dreams," however, is Chapin's unwillingness to let the song be general. Chapin hammers out the theme, making it rigid and as a result he leaves the listener's imagination out in the cold.

The title track, "Dance Band On the Titanic" is a musical allegory about the entertainment industry in which Chapin likens music to the Titanic's dance band—just playing to divert our attention from the nearby iceberg.

Chapin's themes throughout *Dance Band* are interesting and diverse. "We Grew Up a Little Bit" is the story of a workaholic and his neglected, forgotten wife. "Mismatch" tells about a teary-eyed sentimentalist (the typical Chapin figure) and his sado-masochistic girlfriend. "Mismatch" might sound absurd but the song's tenderness transcends any ridicule.

After Chapin's last few albums it appeared there was little chance he could record another album equal in quality to either of his first two albums. *Dance Band On the Titanic* is proof that hack critics like myself make mistakes too.

music review

The fourth album, *Verities and Balderdash* was even worse, being not much more than a bunch of silly songs.

Chapin's next two albums, *Portrait Gallery* and *On the Road to Kingdom Come*, were not only misguided thematically but to this day they rank as the most sloppily overproduced albums of the decade.

But Harry has done at least partial penance for his recent sins with the release of his new album, *Dance Band On the Titanic*.

The most welcome change on *Dance Band* is Chapin's return to the basics. Here the singer-songwriter obviously is involved with the music and there seems to be that thoughtful and honest emotion Chapin captures so completely.

There are many highlights from the new album but the most interesting is "Bluesman," a tale about a medical student that hops a bus south in hopes of being tutored



Photo courtesy of Elektra/Asylum Records

Harry Chapin brings forth honest emotion on his new release *Dance Band on the Titanic*.

"Little piece of Europe" in Omaha's Old Market

By Kathy Foreman

Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part series on Omaha's Old Market.

Drive to Europe in an hour? That's not as impossible as it sounds if you're taking Interstate 80 from Lincoln to Omaha's Old Market.

Although the Old Market district was first developed in 1968 by Mercer Management, this area still is growing. The most recent addition to the Market is "a little piece of Europe" and it's about two-thirds complete.

Informally dubbed "The Alley" by shop owners, renovation of this area began in December, 1975.

There are two restaurants and five shops in The Alley. Two additional shops are slated to open soon, one selling natural fabrics and the other men's clothing. And, in about a month, a dentist will open his doors on the third, and as of now, most unfinished level of The Alley.

Appropriately nicknamed, these shops are located in alley between two Old Market buildings on Howard Street. Until a permanent sign is finished, a chalkboard announces The Alley is open for business.

The first decision confronting shoppers in The Alley is which direction to begin their explorations. Like Dorothy caught at the fork of the road to Oz, either choice will lead to a fantasy land.

Stepping down the dozen or so steps to the lower level, a visitor notices for the first time The Alley is enclosed. Supporting a skylight are redwood ties, later to be painted gray to match the bridges. Mark Mercer of Mercer Management said he hopes to keep this area at 70 degrees F. in the winter, "preserving a garden atmosphere."

At basement level (which is six feet below the original walk), the scent of delicate flowers gives way to the appetizing aroma of food. On this lower level, there are two restaurants, both on the right-hand side of the walk . . . but there the similarity ends.

V. Mertz, open for six weeks, is operated by Mercer's wife, the former Vera Mertz of Switzerland. Mercer said business has been good, with most customers dining from 9:00 p.m. until closing at 1:00 a.m.

Mercer's father, Sam, commented about V. Mertz, "They've created something from scratch that this town needed. I cannot be categorized." However, if a label must be used, either sidewalk cafe, restaurant, delicatessen or wine shop would be appropriate.

The menu at V. Mertz furthers The Alley's European image. Customers may choose espresso, cappuccino, or exo-

tic teas to accompany their Swiss fondues, steak tartare, or plates of imported cheeses and pate. Other imported delicacies include French sardines, Irish smoked-salmon and Atlantic oysters. Meals may be topped with chocolate mousse, or the house specialties, cheesecake or fresh fruit tarts.

Mark Mercer said he thinks his wife's establishment is unique for at least two reasons. He said all pastries and desserts are baked from scratch with absolutely no chemicals or preservatives. Also, most of the wines for sale at V. Mertz are "open," meaning a customer may sample a glass of wine before buying it. The wines are imported from Italy, France, Hungary, Germany and Spain.

Stepping inside V. Mertz from the sidewalk tables, the atmosphere changes to that of a large wine cellar. One dimly lit wall of the restaurant is lined with wine. Hanging above the racks, bunches of basal scent the air and will be used as seasoning on a variety of fresh salads. Against another wall, delicatessen delights range from imported hard candy to crab tree jelly and nine different kinds of honey.

Leicester echoes surroundings

By Bonnie Lutz

Andrew Leicester lives a life of diversity.

The environmental sculptor, who visited the UNL campus Monday and Tuesday, constructs large art forms that conform with the environment. Materials include, water, sand, wood, stone and natural vegetation.

He has become known across the country for his large sculptures on hillsides in Minnesota.

He worked with six art students in the Nebraska Union to compose a colorful sand sculpture Tuesday. The final product was made with 6 separate mazes of the student's designs.

Leicester has many ideas cooking in the fire, including working in collaboration with five other artists to design and construct surrealistic gardens in Cincinnati.

The gardens, modeled after European designs, incorporate more forms of the environment than just flowers, which often are seen in the United States.

Natural construction

They are constructed out of natural vegetation, fences, artificial streams and gardens.

Leicester also is working on a book, doing research around the country on a year's leave of absence from teaching at the Minnesota College of Art. His book entitled *20th Century Archaeology*, is a photo documentary mainly on large, enduring buildings in the

United States. He is focusing on buildings built in this century that have been abandoned. Many of the structures are civil engineering and military buildings. There will be many aerial and ground shots, all taken by Leicester.

Some influencing factors in writing the book come from his past schooling in architecture and physical geology, he said. He said, "Interests I have now I had before I went to art school."

English examples

The Englishman said he takes many examples of designs from European work, contesting that Europe is at a time when people can spend leisure time making their surroundings attractive, where the United States has different priorities. He said he sees the United States as still being industrious, using concrete a great deal, which is, in his eyes, flat and dehumanizing.

The artist said he believes every society goes through cycles, and someday, the United States will have to replace concrete as building material.

Working with such a large medium and preferring large constructions, Leicester has to be commissioned ahead of time and must make a name for himself, he said. This limits the amount of work he can do, but his work always is a challenge, whether it ever is completed or not, he said.