

STILL SINGING WITH MITCH

Spry bandleader reminisces, mocks the Stones and flirts with 'Texan' photographer

Shai Tsur
Daily Texan Staff



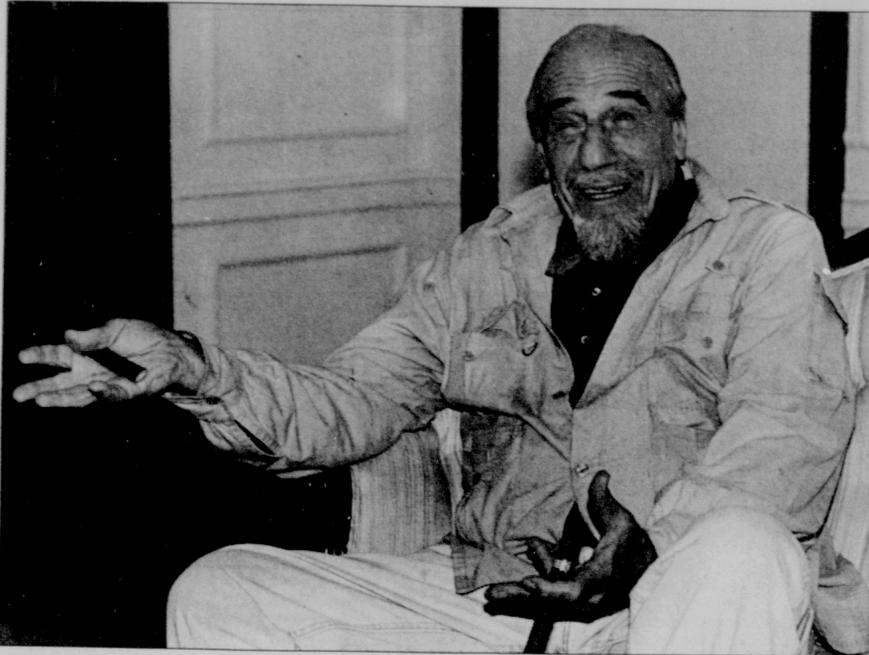
CHOIR

"There are no original ideas anywhere, it's how you execute them," claims Mitch Miller, when asked about the origin of his *Sing Along* shows in the mid '60s. He seems to be a relic of an earlier age, like your great-uncle Shlomo, with his open, friendly persona and bushy Van Dyke beard. In his late 70s or early 80s (his bio doesn't specify), Miller is still lively and animated, waving his trademark cigar around and flirting with the *Texan* photographer in his gravelly, Brooklyn-accented voice.

Although it is now something of a television footnote, between 1965 and 1967, *Sing Along* was popular fare on the tube. Mitch and orchestra took the tradition of the movie house bouncing ball sing-alongs of the '30s to bring such classics as *When the Red, Red Robin, Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin' Along* and *Home on the Range* to the homes of the American viewing public. Although the lyrics were captioned, Miller stresses that he "never had a bouncing ball."

The *Sing Along* shows were just another step in the career of Mitch Miller. A classically trained oboist who toured with George Gershwin in the '30s, Miller was working as the head of Columbia's Popular Music division when he recorded the first of the *Sing Along* albums.

The albums, many of which can still be found in the record bins at



You won't catch cultural icon and stogie-smokin' Mitch Miller in line to buy tickets to see those furballs in Cats.

Half Price Books or in the stacks of wax at your grandparents' house, sold incredibly well (in fact his 1958 Christmas album is still in demand and will soon see re-release by Time-Life records, a deal Miller was working on during the interview), well enough to spawn the TV program several years later.

"It wasn't an easy sell because [the network] said, 'You have no stars.' What they didn't realize is that if you're good on television, then you're a star overnight."

And, he explains, "America is a singing nation. All the ethnic groups that came here huddled together so you had the Germans

with their songerbunds, you had the Italians singing for every occasion, you had the Swedes with their Saint Olaf's Choir, everybody sang. Before radio and television you had the piano in the house, you went to the five-and-dime and listened to a song and bought the sheet music and went home and played and

sang it. And then they sung hymns on Sunday night around the piano, so it's an old tradition."

Well, the days when Mom, Pop and the rest of the family would gather around the Steinway to belt out *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* are long since gone, replaced by the age of MTV and politically conscious rock stars. It seems as though the transition from the popular music of the late '40s and early '50s would have been rough on someone like Miller. And, although it is widely said that Miller was one of rock's first critics, he takes exception to that characterization.

"Everybody thinks I was against rock music. I was against radio stations all playing only rock music. This was before FM. Now with FM you have your choice, which is all people ask for." In fact, Miller has rather outspoken views on the genre.

"You have artists like Ray Charles or Aretha Franklin, they're fabulous. You must remember that rock in America and in England was nothing more than a rip-off of black music. The public wasn't ready to accept it from black musicians so they took watered white-bread versions from white musicians."

Rock music aside, for his appearance with the Austin Choral Union, Miller has arranged an evening of music focusing on the great American musicals and composers. It appears to be a testament to the lasting popularity of the composers of the early part of this century, as well as a statement on the problems with musical theater today.

"Well, I'll give you a good example," he explains. "In one generation you had [great musicians like]

MITCH MILLER WITH THE AUSTIN CHORAL UNION
Where: Palmer Auditorium
When: Saturday. Call 476-5461 for details.

George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter ... and who do you have now? You have Steve Sondheim and Lloyd Webber."

Miller makes it perfectly clear that the diminutive English composer/rich guy does not rank high on his list. "I guarantee you can't sing me four bars of any one of Webber's songs. So you have only Steve Sondheim. And so there's a paucity and you go to a Broadway show and you come out singing the scenery. It's either derivative, third-rate Puccini as it is with *Phantom of the Opera* — well, he steals from everybody, actually — but you have wonderful stagecraft and people are hustled into it."

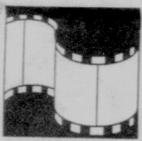
Miller, however, does seem amused by the revivalist trend of today's rock, where the '60s wash-ups drag their rusty old bones out on tour again.

"It's very interesting also that you have guys now in their 40s or 50s, you know, KISS is coming here," he chuckles. "Those guys are all 40 years old. And the Rolling Stones — a couple of them are 50 years old. The way you judge rock music is what will be around after they've gone. Where with all these guys that I mentioned to you [Cole Porter et al.], their music rises to the top and stays there like rich cream and no one's promoting it, just the excellence of their songs."

'Vacation' strays too far from home

Jarmusch's first film lacks life, sly humor

Jeff Turrentine
Daily Texan Staff



FILM

Everything about this film, Jarmusch's first, suggests that it's taking place in some sort of battle zone: images of abandoned and decrepit lower-Manhattan buildings, scenes of the psychologically infirm babbling and singing to themselves, a pervasive zeitgeist of desperation and hopelessness. The war, though it may have only existed in the minds of its scarred veterans, has taken its toll.

Fans of Jarmusch's other films may wonder at first whether *Vacation* was actually helmed by the same director who has brought audiences such idiosyncratic gems as *Stranger than Paradise*, *Down by Law* and *Mystery Train*.

In those films, Jarmusch celebrated the mundane by injecting awkwardly actionless, "boring" situations with sly humor; in *Vacation*, that humor, or the very idea that there's gold to be found within those awkward moments, is conspicuously absent.

In its stead Jarmusch — for whom the film constituted a master's thesis at NYU's film school — fills the gaps with a disappointingly trite, college-boy angst. The result is a very self-conscious film that begs the viewer to accept its self-consciousness as art.

The character of Aloysius is essentially a barebones fictionalization of the actor, Christopher Parker, who plays him.

Jarmusch met Parker when Parker was a 14-year-old urchin haunting the streets of lower Manhattan, hanging out at CBGB's. The director became fascinated

PERMANENT VACATION

Starring: Christopher Parker
Director: Jim Jarmusch
Playing at: Union Theatre, Friday and Saturday, 7:30 p.m.
Rating: ★★ (out of four)

with the boy's homeless existence, devoid of emotional connections, separated by a wall of Cool from any who might make up an ersatz family or circle of close friends.

Aloysius' life (and presumably Christopher's), as he puts it, resembles a "connect-the-dots:" a perpetual process of starting and stopping, a transitory existence contingent on constant motion and the avoidance, at all costs, of settling down.

Thus the movie consists of nothing but the fragmented events of a two-day odyssey: Allie visits his mother in the institution, haunts an old burned-out building he used to call home, meets a beautiful lunatic and a junkie and a sax player (Jarmusch regular John Lurie), steals a car, sells it to a fence and hops aboard a ship for Paris.

Vacation looks and feels like a documentary, due partly to Jarmusch's employing non-actors in most of the roles (a convention indigenous to the downtown/New Wave genre of filmmaking, of which *Vacation* was a shining example upon its 1980 release).

The gritty 16 mm color and the Cage-inspired sound track (Jarmusch says it's Javanese) add to the film's subversive atmosphere — but always it's a subversiveness overly conscious of itself, and thus rendered merely pretentious.

Still, *Vacation* is worth seeing, if only to catch Jarmusch precociously arranging the building blocks that will serve as the foundations for his later films. Between the cloying "artiness" of this film and the inspired brilliance of his next, *Stranger than Paradise*, Jim Jarmusch did an awful lot of growing up.

Chromatics secure with ties that bind

Michele Bowman
Daily Texan Staff



FOLK

The entertainment world has always been fascinated with sibling performers. From the Everlys and Osmonds to today's Zappas and Penns, audiences seem to get an extra thrill from seeing familial units in the arts. And when siblings appear in the same band, as with the Austin's Chromatics, family ties create a unique and refreshing venture in music.

From their humble beginnings around their mother's piano and in an Austin church choir, Synde and Saffron Parten found that their voices sounded good together, and whether genetics or their musical environment was to credit, these two young women grew up singing. They formed a simple act about seven years ago which consisted of Synde and Saffron playing acoustic guitars and singing. Add brother Stacy (Synde's twin) on vocals and guitar, and Tito Walsh on bass, and a primarily acoustic-based sister act evolved into a full-fledged band.

An earthy yet punctuated blend of folk rock and country blues is the result of this collaboration. The two women's voices match perfectly, and with Stacy's added bass, the vocals on their debut album, *Never Enough*, are richly layered. Section player Al Billings' electric guitar work punctuates songs like *Say What* and the title song and adds a certain flamboyance to the primarily folksy acoustic guitars of the sisters.

The album is a collection of songs whose unique style lies in the harmonies generated by the Partens, and the Chromatics' ability to span a wide musical range is indicative of their diverse talents. *Doin' Fine Daddy*, a country-tinged ballad, is followed by the acoustic folksy *What's Changed*, and other songs reflect the band's versatility in rock and blues.

The Chromatics' strength, though, is in their dedication to their music. Synde and Saffron collaborate on the songwriting, churning out tunes in which one sister will begin writing the lyrics and the other will often finish.

Jets is a perfect example, according to Saffron.



The Parten clan will never have to find a band to play their family reunions and weddings.

THE CHROMATICS

Where: Colorado Street Cafe, 705 Colorado St.; Green Mesquite, 1400 Barton Springs Road.
When: Friday, 8:30 p.m.; Saturday, 7 p.m., respectively

Disturbed by the military's insensitivity to the madness it breeds with its war machines, she began writing the lyrics, and Synde was able to help her sister finish, expressing her own discontent with the loud jets that roar over her Austin home. A stinging criticism of military build-up is the result, and this haunting song flows beautifully.

Synde and Saffron cite a varied list of early influences which includes artists such as Joni Mitchell and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. They explain that they loved anything they could harmonize along with. More recently, they have

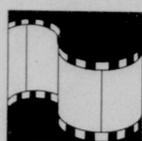
taken to punk and pop bands such as Joy Division and U2.

With the recent addition of an avid fan-turned-manager and the excitement of inclusion in South by Southwest, the band has come a long way in just two short years. They have garnered a following at both Chicago House and the Austin Outhouse, and they expect to tour Texas within the year. Synde and Saffron's appeal recently landed them a job singing back-up vocals for Townes Van Zant.

With road gigs to Central Texas towns like San Marcos and San Antonio as well as increasing airplay on major radio stations around the state, the Chromatics have been almost too busy to notice that they are gaining popularity among central Texas audiences. But pride in their work and stability in their band have given The Chromatics a chance to succeed, and they are hopeful that their unique talents will only grow.

Jarman's visual chaos 'Last' but not least

Jan Howze
Daily Texan Staff



FILM

Anyone who has watched MTV in the past few years will be accustomed to the barrage of images screaming out of *The Last of England*. Jolts of searing color, cacophonous music and discordant clips wheel around in this latest Derek Jarman feature film, much like every

third video during 120 minutes. But Jarman's 87 minutes carry a mesmerizing message of the disintegration of British culture missing from your average British band video, with an arresting melange of urban-industrial ruin, erotica and old home video clips.

For example, the camera circles around a young tough humping a Renaissance painting, Jarman cuts to the figure of a child, then back again.

Fire, a demolished building. The punk wraps a cord around his arm, hitting his arm in search of a vein.

In a similar manner, the film convincingly documents a spiral of decline, all hung against a curtain of music, sporadic narration, news broadcasts and intertwined sounds, recogniz-



A burning of Atlanta, postmodern style.

able but unidentifiable.

Jarman establishes a few characters, using a couple of his regulars, Tilda Swinton and Spencer Leigh. The characters provide a framework for the problems that accost England and the English people. Short, recurring scenarios section off different aspects of life, thereby exploring the parts that lead back to the whole message.

But although the sounds and images contain a type of cohesion and rhythm, *England* isn't an easy film to watch. The scene after scene parade

THE LAST OF ENGLAND

Starring: Tilda Swinton, Spencer Leigh
Director: Derek Jarman
Playing at: Hogg Auditorium, Friday through Sunday, 7:30 p.m.
Rating: ★★★ (out of four)

becomes an unrelenting horror show made more frightening by its reality.

Just like Jarman's ski-masked terrorists, footage of "freedom fighters" can be seen daily on national news along with scenes of wreckage that once was a city. All the while, the government boasts national pride and capitalism, ignoring problems of the disenfranchised and the rotting environment.

Thrust out in such a way, *England* forces the viewer to think about this inexorable slide of a national culture and how its superficial ideals have led to the current situation. And, of course, what lies ahead. By touching upon aspects of sex, violence, disenchantment, love and power through the short vignettes, Jarman shows through his eyes what England has become.

The medium and the style strike a chord of familiarity to the TV generation while the deeper message hits a mark more base and more terrifying. Using the tools of society, Jarman delivers a unmistakable message. Destruction is a theme of life. It can't be avoided, so don't try to change the channel.

CRITIC'S CHOICE

ERIC JOHNSON

There's nothing wrong with the way Eric Johnson sounds. No, Johnson's problem lies in the fact that his Sound sounds the same from album to album, track to track.

That's not to say his new Capitol release *Ah Via Musicom* is a disaster; Johnson still finds himself awash in melodies for their own sake, creating an album's worth of guitar wizardry that ultimately becomes distant and detached. For someone hailed as an exciting and fresh blues practitioner, Johnson comes off as nothing short of boring.

