

# CAT STEVENS

“In school I was ‘the artist boy.’ I was beat up, but I was noticed.”

By ROBERT WINDELER



THE suite at New York's St. Regis Hotel is full of the trappings and personnel that seem inevitably to surround a pop-music superstar. Arrangements and musical instruments are strewn around the room. There is a manager, bearded and dressed in a mid-morning dashiki of many colors; a press agent; another agent busily booking a U.S. tour (Hawaii is out, he and the star decide, because mainland-quality backup musicians can't be provided in time); and a fresh-faced, long-haired American girl whose present function is merely decoration. A record player provided by one record company plays the newest Stevie Wonder record (provided by another record company, and not Stevie Wonder's either). Musicians and friends stroll in at odd moments.

At the center of all this activity and attention sits Cat Stevens, slight, intense, black-bearded, and hiding behind impenetrable dark glasses until the final five minutes of the interview. His heritage is an exotic mixture of Swedish and Greek, and it shows in the very dark hair and eyes, the fine features, and the Scandinavian-textured but olive-toned skin. He tries to think of himself as merely a singer-songwriter (not necessarily in that order, however), but he is widely regarded by others as nothing short of a phenomenon.

Already, with only his fourth U.S. album in release on the A & M label, he is accounted by many the most sensational British import since any one-fourth of the Beatles. And, as a result of his albums, "Tea for the Tillerman" and "Teaser and the Firecat" among them, and such singles as *Father and Son*, *Peace Train*, and *Morning Has Broken*, he is, to put it mildly, in demand—for concert tours in the great halls of the world, U.S. nightclubs, and—now that his two-year A & M contract is up for renewal—by other recording companies. This trip to New York ("the first time I've really be able to enjoy myself here") was to have been mostly fun, but the bidding among record companies has been furious. If he wants to see a show, he merely names the show; if he wants to go to breakfast, lunch, or dinner, he merely names the restaurant; or if he wants to make records for the next five years, he merely names his terms—almost. This is understandable in view of the fact that each of his records approximately doubles the sales of his previous one. Although his slightly ethereal good looks, his straightforward acoustic guitar, and lyrics that at least dance around the edges of saying something put him solidly in the current pop-music mainstream, his appeal is broad and broadening to include both the underground and middle-aged establishmentarians.

Cat Stevens accepts his lot with comparative calm, saving his nervous energy for writing, recording, and performing his music, partly at least because his present success is, in a way, a comeback. Several years ago Cat Ste-

vens was a star in Britain. But he had little personal control, dozens of technically adept but unsympathetic backup musicians he didn't need, and managers who treated him, as well as his songs, as just so much raw material. His voice was younger and smaller, and his appearance and presence—by his design or that of his backers—was strictly shallow late-1960's swinging London. He had a breakdown, tuberculosis, a collapsed lung, and spent several months in a sanatorium. When he came out, he discovered that the other half of being a sudden star is to be, just as suddenly, a has-been.

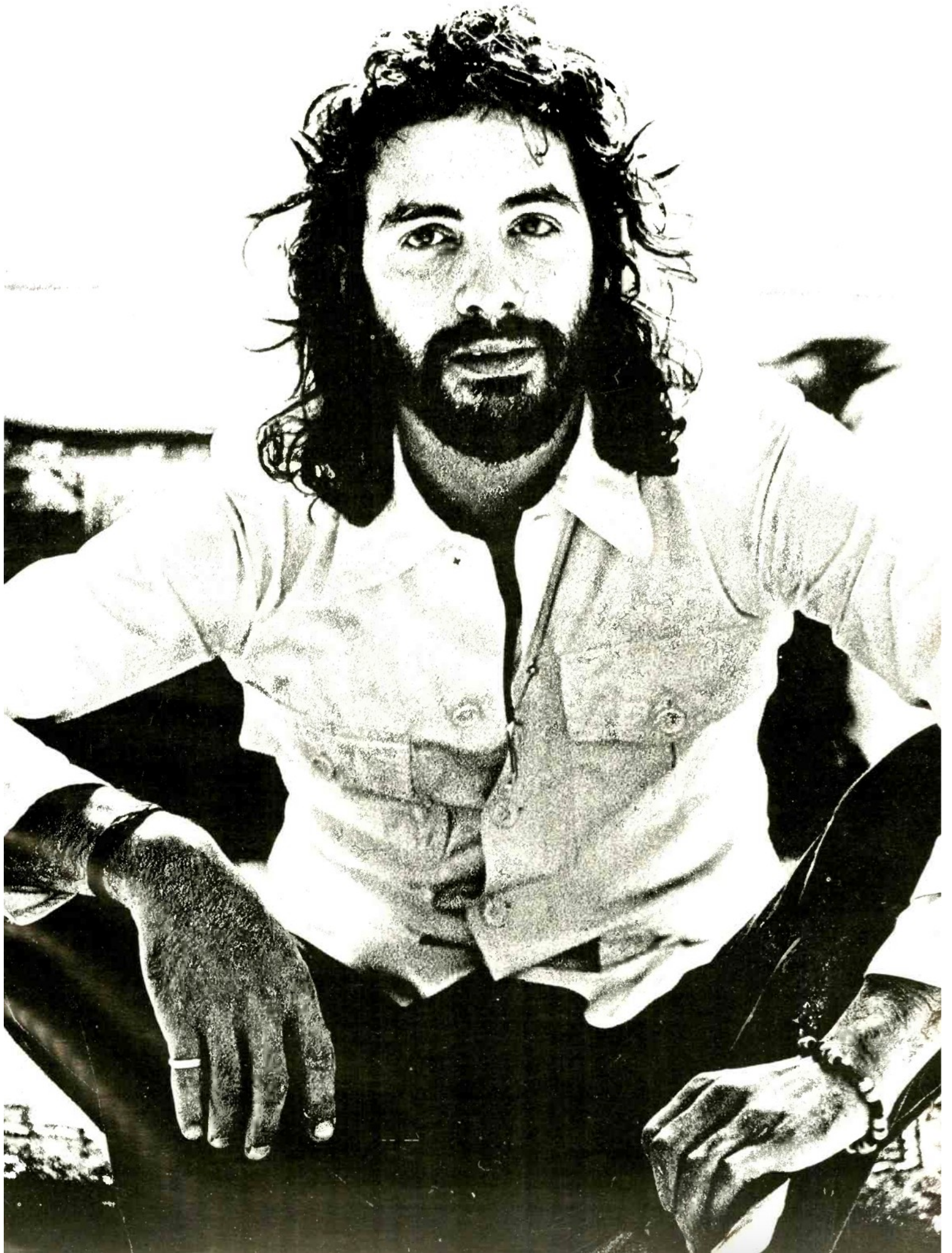
"It's strange—to some people it looks like two big blocks of time," he says of his two singing careers. "But not to me. I'm short-sighted in a long-sighted way. Each song I write, for example, is a short sequence, and when I'm doing it, I think of nothing else; yet I hope all the songs add up, move along in order. All that time in the hospital, I was thinking, working, and when I came out, I was further along. My next LP, for example, is very different from the others. Some people will like it, and other people will not. I've got this sound people associate with me, and yet I want to move and change. What I want them to see in all my work is *clarity*. I can't stand music that is unclear." He gestures toward the record player and says, "Stevie Wonder is getting all wrapped up in a slightly misty sound, whereas before he was very clear. Maybe he's going through it to get himself somewhere else, and we don't see the end of it yet. A lot of people are getting a bit misty just now with the synthesizer. I've started working with one, but before I put my finger on it, I had to walk around it a few dozen times to see what I thought it could do. I listened to other things, and now I think I know how to use it."

He won't talk about changing his name to Cat Stevens, what it was before, or what the name means now. "I've been Cat Stevens for about seven years now, and that's it. Talking about it is the same as trying to describe what you felt before you were born."

CAT STEVENS was born Steven Giorgiou (he's still called Steve by close friends) in July of 1948 in the Russell Square area of central London, the second son of his parents, who own the Moulin Rouge restaurant there. "I still go there a lot, and I'd like to get a house there sometime." His parents are considering building an apartment house near Russell Square. Steve went to local West End schools, got into trouble constantly, and did poorly in everything but art. "I wanted to be a cartoonist," he says. But during a one-year course at Hammersmith College of Art all that changed: "I somehow got into music, writing my own songs. Other people didn't feel for the songs the way I did, and so I had to start singing them myself; it

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was the only way I could do it." He signed with English Decca and started on his first career. Although he had to forsake art as a profession, he still designs and draws his own album jackets, and these days he is getting even more involved with painting, currently Japanese art "because it is so simple." He says, "I love the idea of sitting in some part of Europe, the Mediterranean maybe, painting the landscape." But since he's only twenty-four, that kind of life is at least a few years off.

Cat is hard put to analyze what he's trying to do with music. "I just let it happen. I feel that it's so much more reliable that way than to try to apply whatever intelligence measurement to it. The best thing about what I am doing is that I can release a record and it can create vibes all over the world at the same time. That's the greatest thing about music on records: it breaks barriers down. Music has joined us together more than anything.

One of Cat's own compositions, *Peace Train*, is sometimes interpreted as a meaningful plea or as a profound expression of optimism. Not so, says Cat. "The lyrics are used strictly as a vehicle for the melody. I had the melody, liked it, and wanted something a little happy and upbeat for a change, and nothing too specific, which *Peace Train* isn't."

In composing he almost always starts with the melody first. "Sometimes maybe a title, and then the title and the tune become interwoven, but the lyrics are always last. I still have lots of old songs which I haven't done yet. My

new LP contains a lot I wrote two years ago—the time wasn't right then, but they just rolled off when I recorded them this time."

Cat says he doesn't record the work of other composers "for the same reason as in the beginning nobody did mine—I am not the best person to interpret somebody else's songs." The one important exception is a certain kind of standard that is in the public domain—old hymns. He found the beautiful *Morning Has Broken* in an old church hymnbook one day, "had no doubt about its loveliness," and put chords to it—keeping, however, its original lyric intact. His own favorite musicians include Sly, John Lennon ("he always seems to come through for me"), Biff Rose on his first album, and Leo Kottke.

**T**HE worst thing about stardom, Cat feels, is that "people look at me as if to say 'are you human?' They see an image, not me. Even at a party, standing before me, they don't see me—which ought to be quite simple. I'm not godly. I'd like people to see godliness in me, but not a god."

The most noticeable change in Stevens' life since his second success is a large house he bought in Fulham, Southwest London. "It's all done up, but I won't be there more than a year. I don't like to stay in one position too long. I do like homeliness, however; I like to have a home and know it's there." He's installing a recording studio in the house now, and one of his dreams is to provide all the

## Cat Stevens— An Early Retrospective

By Noel Coppage

**M**ANY have picked up scraps of the story by now; at the age of nineteen (in 1967), Cat Stevens had written three of the songs on the British charts. His own recording of *I Love My Dog* (on Deram) was "number one and still climbing," as George Carlin used to say, and his recording of *Matthew and Son* and the Tremeloes' recording of *Here Comes My Baby* weren't far behind. America had not yet heard of him, but the lad was an overnight wonder in England, and he has hinted, in the laconic and infrequent interviews he has granted in the last few years, that it was another of those "too-much-too-soon" stories. It is said that studio smartasses wouldn't even speak to him, and it is obvious to anyone who listens to his albums then and now that Stevens had little to say about how those early songs were recorded.

We can surmise that the pop-star treatment was torture to the sensitive young man. We can also surmise that something had to give from the evidence that something *did* give—his physical health. He contracted tuberculosis. Odd. Judy Collins came down with the same disease at a time when her life, personally and professionally, was in turmoil. It isn't all that

common a disease these days, and since it attacks the lungs which pump the air past the vocal cords, it is presumably one of the ailments that singers dread most—if they really like being singers. But in both these cases, the illness gave the singers a second wind, providing a moratorium from the rat race, a time in which to think things through.

Popular mythology has it that the recuperative period was the turning point in the life of Cat Stevens—and in some ways it was: his first album after that ("Mona Bone Jakon") was on a different label (A & M) and was so much simpler and cleaner than the previous records that it seems likely Cat demanded full control of the recording sessions this time. The illness unquestionably affected his lyrics, too, for such lines as "My baby will be waiting there/With a yellow ribbon in her hair" and "School is out now, we're gonna have some fun/We're gonna make like we're the only ones" were never to appear again. His lyrics became more reflective, less sure of themselves. And yet, it is not at all surprising that the boy who wrote songs like *Lady* and *I'm So Sleepy* should become the man who wrote songs like *Moonshadow* and *Wild World*. Once you've developed the knack—admittedly no easy task—of listening through the horrendous glop of the overarrangements of the early albums "Matthew and Son" and "New Masters" (especially the latter), you realize he was no pimply male teenybopper. There are songs, such as *I'm So Sleepy* and *Blackness of the Night* (it still sounds brand new), in which the listener can sense, as he sometimes can with classical music, how a melodic theme inspired the composer to invent a secondary theme based on the first one's climactic bars.

Heavy stuff for a kid who, producers and audience alike assumed, just wanted to be a pop star.

Stevens' maturity as a *vocalist* didn't suddenly happen as a result of his illness. The turning point in his singing occurred before that, between "Matthew and Son" and "New Masters." In the earlier album, he seemed to be trying to hide the attractively furry raggedness that now distinguishes his vocals. He was holding back, trying for a more "pleasant" sound than he



was comfortable making. There is a bit of this too-careful modulation in "New Masters" also (try *I'm Gonna Be King*), but by and large it had disappeared, and *Moonshadow* and *Blackness* are sung (but not arranged!) the way he would do them today.

Of course, as I've already pointed out, it's almost impossible to hear *what* he sounds like in "Matthew and Son," and difficult enough in the case of "New Masters." The bloated arrangements in "Matthew" are nondescript—rockin' with the (1967) trend here and brandishing an arty bank of George Martin cellos there: the only thing consistent about them is that they always bury the lyrics. The arrangements in "Masters" are uniformly lush, the approximate consistency of a slightly fatigued prune whip. Still, I don't know of many 1972 songs, however arranged, that top *Blackness of the Night* as it's pre-



music on every track for some of his recordings. He even played drums on a track for his first American album, "Mona Bone Jakon," though he had never played before. "I just picked up the drumsticks and used my natural instinct."

Other than the new house, he doesn't think his life has changed. "I've been lucky, but I was lucky all the way through school, and I've always been in a position where people were following me and observing what I was doing. In school I was 'the artist boy.' I was beat up, but I was noticed." The pop-music marathon and the night-person lifestyle suit him. "I'm too nervous to get tired. I can't stop. There's something that's going on inside me—or outside—pushing."

"The flint of my life is girls," he says. "They ignite me. But I don't see myself getting into any kind of marriage scene. It would be totally impossible, too restricting and unchangeable. Besides, I don't think I'm very easy to live with—I find it difficult even for myself."

His current album was still unnamed at the time of this interview. "It took a long time to do, about three months constantly. But I saw this LP more clearly before, during, and after making it than any of the others. One day in my office I almost went berserk I saw it so clearly and was so afraid I couldn't do it. Then I got more and more relaxed, in a position to say 'this is what I want to do, to forget what everybody else says. Lyrically this album is very visual, a series of little pictures and stories. 'Tea for

the Tillerman' had that, too—you could see the settings.

"The freedom to do what you want to do comes from the discipline of whatever you're doing," he says. "One reason I love Britain and London is that—it's a little like Germany in this respect—there are so many restrictions and yet so much comes from it. It's like Russia in the time of the czars. There was so much royalty and repression, and yet there was all this beautiful freedom in music and the ballet.

"I love America and have always, constantly, been more aware of America than England. I think that's why I am accepted so totally here. I have been embarrassed by some of the things about English music. Sometimes you go to ridiculous extremes in America—in music and everything else—and then you look at them, don't know what to do with them, and so you throw them away. The English don't ever reach those extremes."

Cat feels that America, which he has toured from Carnegie Hall to the Troubadour, will in time become less self-involved. "It is seeing itself for the first time from other countries' point of view." But like most lovers he also has a scathing criticism or two. Cat walked out of the Carnegie Hall program "An Evening with Groucho Marx" at intermission not long ago, feeling that Groucho was playing the wrong hall to the wrong audience on the wrong night. "You Americans have this lust for demolishing something you've constantly built up. Next you'll be going to Carnegie Hall to see the President die."

served in "New Masters." Even with a mushy arrangement, it has a melody that compares favorably with the bulk of Jacques Brel's work, and the lyrics, though no threat to the reputation of Yeats, are almost as pretty as some of Byron's: "In the blackness of the night I see a sparkle of a star/From a sweet, silver tear of a child/She's clutching a photograph of long, long ago/When her parents were happy—she's too young to know. . . ."



After Cat won fame on A & M, Deram Records re-released "Matthew and Son" and "New Masters" as a two-record set, then brought out a third album, "Very Young and Early Songs." This appears to be the result of an intensive search through all the tapes he left on the premises. Since only four of the songs were written in 1967, the album for the most part is not as early as "Matthew and Son." It sounds like a reject version of "New Masters," having the same cello-rich embellishments, but it contains two songs, *Here Comes My Wife* (1968) and *Where Are You* (1969), that might compare with Stevens' off-hand work today—if he did any off-hand work today. It also contains some trite stuff, such as *Image of Hell*, that I expect Stevens hoped he'd heard the last of. And it contains *Come on Baby*, which could be an outtake from "New Masters,"

although it sounds identical to *Shift That Log* in that album. These moderately young and fairly early songs provide some documentation about an intellect that sought, in those days, to go beyond such lyrics as "Ah got you under mah thumb" or "Ain't it great to get stoned," but mostly the album merely documents how earnestly record companies slam the barn doors after the horse, or the Cat, has made his escape.

**M**OST Americans first heard of Cat Stevens when FM stations started playing cuts from "Mona Bone Jakon," the first album on A & M and the first post-hospital recording. From the first tinkle of Cat's seedy guitar playing the introduction to *Lady D'Arbonville* it was clear that the album was going to be as clean as a surgeon's scalpel. There were flute accents here and there, and even strings in some of the ballads, but all the background stuff was *background* stuff, with Stevens relying mostly on his own voice and piano, the somewhat more conventional (than his) guitar picking of Alun Davies, and John

business: that Stevens, had he wanted to, could have been among the best of the young, white blues singers.

Happily, he didn't want to be. A young, white, blues singer is by definition an actor, an illusionist, but Stevens connects well with his audiences in part because he convinces them he's real. As soon as they could hear him, they started becoming convinced, and "Mona Bone Jakon" is where they started hearing him. People believe him, I think, because he doesn't make extraordinary claims, doesn't pose as a Messiah. He doesn't write the tumble-of-words kind of "poetry" excoriating all the values the world had adopted before he arrived on the scene; he does not write any new verses in the "I've found it" cant of the middle-class *guru*—in *I Wish, I Wish*, he lets "I wish I knew . . ." trail off into the fade-out.

The songs of "Mona" were better than the previous songs. They, like their arrangements, were simpler—Stevens seemed to be writing now like a man who realizes he does have time, after all, to work out each idea fully instead of having to launch a rocket with every chord. There is no doubt that the illness had something to do with that. *Lady D'Arbonville* turned out to be a success musically, although it must be regarded as an experiment lyrically. *Maybe You're Right*, *Trouble*, and *Katmandu* each had some outstanding feature of music and words that was head-turning, and *Fill My Eyes* and *Lillywhite* needed to steep in the listener's mind for a time—maybe weeks—to be fully appreciated. *Time* may have been a mistake, one of those moody jazz-grounded experiments that everyone, even Gordon Lightfoot, seems determined to try at least once. (Continued overleaf)

Mona Bone Jakon



Ryan's bass. It is almost an exquisite little album, with melodies that charm slowly and left-handedly, with the Stevens vocal style fully realized, and with sly revelations—such as the one in his rendering of *Pop Star*, a bit of tough humor about the



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"Tea for the Tillerman" is so good and so well known that most commentary about it now would be superfluous. It has a fuller sound than "Mona," although its arrangements are by no means cluttered. The logical assumption is that Stevens in "Mona" was being a bit reactionary—had to swing the pendulum all the way back to be sure he had a good grip on it—and in doing "Tea" he was confident that he could add sounds and maintain control. His piano was brought up a bit; he did more vocal overdubbing, and, in a song like *Wild World*, the pickers were allowed to cut some figures.

I'm still a bit sad that everyone in the world isn't humming *Sad Lisa* (even though the melody is a bit too baroque for most hummers, it was the melody of the year), but the outlandish popularity of *Longer Boats*, another of my pets, is some consolation. *Longer Boats*, Stevens has said, is about flying saucers, in whose existence he believes. He has been telling concert audiences that he later wrote another verse to make that clear (it says if you look up you may see them looking down), and he's supposedly been working on another song about flying saucers.



Following up "Tea" was something like the problem the Who faced in following up "Tommy." Almost anything would be a disappointment, and "Teaser and the Firecat" was, to some degree. In following up "Tommy," the Who resorted to a "live" album, certainly the easiest way out. "Teaser" is not a "live" album, but it reads like one, with songs recorded in a sequence that has up-tempo pieces waking up the "audience" after the ballads have lulled them into mellow-mellow land. *Changes IV* provides a raucous change of pace between the peaceable *If I Laugh* and the almost painfully lovely ballad *How Can I Tell You*. Turn the disc over and *Tuesday's Dead*, another of Cat's forays into Latin rhythms, snaps your eyes open again before *Morning Has Broken* calms you. So it goes, but it is an album of quite some substance. Songs like *If I Laugh*, *How Can I Tell You*, *The Wind*, and *Morning Has Broken* contain some of the

finest melodies I've ever heard on a single pop album and have me speculating again that Cat may be in a class by himself—or maybe in a class by himself with Joni Mitchell—in the art/science of constructing melodies for pop songs. One of the nicer people I've met through the mails, a young lady in California, is a devotee of lieder, especially the songs of Mahler, and she assures me that if Cat Stevens had lived in the right time and place, his songs would now be sung by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau.

Stevens' main strength as a songwriter, aside from his marvelous ability to construct melodies, lies in his own desire for growth. He's willing to take risks. He has tried bossa nova, calypso, and other exotic rhythms; he's tried standard-beat rockers; he's done something approaching an art song; he's written at least one song in the twelve-measure blues motif; he's even, in

### CAT STEVENS



*Rubylove* (in "Teaser"), done something Greek-sounding with a couple of bouzoukis. Not every venture is a success, but Stevens at a very early age has earned more respect than several of our aging rock stars who keep rewriting their first hits.

His main weakness is that he tends to fall into banality at times, and this shows in some lyrics. It shows particularly when he tries to write Moody Blues-style lyrics—let's-wrap-up-the-universe-in-three-verses-and-a-bridge. *Changes IV* is an example. His best lyrics seem to have been knocked out in a few minutes and don't pretend to be anything much beyond verses that will be sung for a few months and then forgotten—which is, after all, the natural lot of most pop music. Stevens is not a verbal genius, but he is sometimes lucky enough to encounter inspiration. When that happens he can, as I said, be almost as pretty as Byron, or he can chase a small to middling insight all the way back into the crannies of the psyche, depending on the form the inspiration takes.

His strength as a performer is his voice. He has been blessed with an interesting one, lower-pitched than most, with a weather-beaten fringe around it, and he has just enough taste and technique to keep it out of trouble. He has a tendency (which seems to be diminishing) to supplement the lyrics of his songs with "Oh yes" and "Ooh-woo." That could be maddening if he let it get out of hand the way Sam Cooke did and José Feliciano still does. But he always pulls up short of that, and I can only conclude that taste comes to his rescue.

It says something about the times when we consider how much we have come to expect of one so young as Cat Stevens. Years ago we made LeRoy Anderson rich and famous for writing melodies *alone*—many of them inferior to Cat's melodies—and now we routinely nitpick about words. I'm not saying it is a bad situation—a world without *any* attempt at critical judgment would be a pretty squishy place. But I *am* saying: How old is a young artist nowadays? How long can they last, the John Lennons and the Cat Stevenses who have come so far in so little time? Time, as they say, will tell, and maybe Cat was stuck into our time with us for the purpose of making it a little more livable. He does.

**CAT STEVENS:** *Very Young and Early Songs*. Cat Stevens (vocals, piano, guitar); orchestra. *Here Comes My Wife: Lovely City: The Tramp: Come On and Dance: Image of Hell: Where Are You: It's a Super Duper Life: A Bad Night: Come On Baby: The View from the Top*. DERAM DES 18061.

**CAT STEVENS:** *Matthew and Son*. Cat Stevens (vocals, guitar); instrumental accompaniment. Mike Hurst and Alan Tew, arrangers. *Matthew and Son: I Love My Dog: Here Comes My Baby: Bring Another Bottle Baby: I've Found a Love: I See a Road: I'm Gonna Get a Gun: School is Out: Baby Get Your Head Screwed On: Speak to the Flowers: Hummingbird: Lady*. (Now sold as a two-disc set with "New Masters" below.)

**CAT STEVENS:** *New Masters*. Cat Stevens (vocals, guitar); orchestra. *Kitty: I'm So Sleepy: Northern Wind: The Laughing Apple: Smash Your Heart: Moonstone: The First Cut Is the Deepest: I'm Gonna Be King: Ceylon City: Blackness of the Night: Come On Baby (Shift that Log): I Love Them All*. A two-disc set with "Matthew and Son." DERAM DES 18005-10.

**CAT STEVENS:** *Mona Bone Jakon*. Cat Stevens (vocals, guitar, piano); other musicians. *Lady D'Arbonville: Maybe You're Right: Pop Star: I Think I See the Light: Trouble: Mona Bone Jakon: I Wish, I Wish: Katmandu: Time: Fill My Eyes: Lillywhite*. A & M SP4260.

**CAT STEVENS:** *Tea for the Tillerman*. Cat Stevens (vocals, guitar, piano); other musicians. *Where Do the Children Play?: Hard-Headed Woman: Wild World: Sad Lisa: Miles from Nowhere: But I Might Die Tonight: Longer Boats: Into White: On the Road to Find Out: Father and Son: Tea for the Tillerman*. A & M SP4280.

**CAT STEVENS:** *Teaser and the Firecat*. Cat Stevens (vocals, guitar, piano); other musicians. *The Wind: Rubylove: If I Laugh: Changes IV: How Can I Tell You: Tuesday's Dead: Morning Has Broken: Bitterblue: Moonshadow: Peace Train*. A & M SP4313.