Garcia at the Keystone:
New Woman Poet on the Horizon

By MichaeL Beard

With so much free music around on every street-corner and spot of grass, why would anyone want to get packed into a crowded, smoke-filled room for three dollars a head and listen to store-bought music at the Keystone? There aren't many answers to this question, but the Jerry Garcia/Merle Saunders set is one of them, and it jammed us in last Saturday like cattle in a packing house.

From a perch in the balcony, overlooking countless spectators and the long columns which hold up the funky Keystone ceiling, it might have been hard to tell Garcia was there at all until he started playing. He hides obtrusively against the wall and leaves the stage to his band: bass, a single horn. Saunders' organ, normal percussion and, inexplicably, a bongo drum player (left over from Garcia's beatnik days?)—but when they begin to play you know that it's Garcia you came to hear.

He plays guitar unlike anyone else, but his distinctive genre does not show up all at once. He has no flashy signature runs like Alvin Lee or B.B. King—though they play with rare authority. His art is one of endless resources, evolving patiently out of the original musical situation. Perhaps his talent shows up best at other times when he does very familiar tunes like Smokey Robinson's "Second That Emotion" or Jimmy Cliff's "The Harder They Come," so that you can hear the simple line on which he strings his improvisations. People explain jazz used to use the spatial metaphor of an excursion: circling around the original tune, leaving it behind. When Garcia does "The Harder They Come" (which can be heard on the new album "Live at the Keystone Fantasy F-76003") you can hear the whole process. He is hardly through playing the tune through once straight before he has found a way out, a variation through which you can still see the melodic premise, but bent and refracted. The water ripples. The tune submerges further; it bongs into plastic shapes which take on their own reality. An anti-tune develops, and it is as if the material the tune is made of has been turned inside out. The house in has been torn down and reassembled with the woman on the outside. You get used to living there—but then there is Garcia's voice singing the verse and it all snaps back into place.

What Saunders and Garcia do is formally like jazz, but without the lush sounds of jazz or the complex percussion (or that was in the bongo drum?). It is not so much an aesthetic of getting further and further out as a celebration of the whole trip, from taking off to coming down. But it's like jazz in its sneakingness. Even if you have been missing it for hours straight the time is always at hand when you happen to tune in. As bars by accident, or just to listen a little more carefully, than usual and... oops, what was that?... you're caught.

Other recommended local entertainment: are the Tubes too outrageous for Berkeley? They should perhaps be locked up! I am told that their act called Mondo Bondage is so outrageous it has been performed only once in its entirety. Is tonight the night? Critics, we are going to have to decide for ourselves. The authorities are powerless. The place is the Longbranch at Dwight and San Pablo, tonight and Saturday. Also, Butch Wacks and the Glass Packs (an act which is no less visual and every bit as refined) have one more Wednesday at the Keystone.

Meanwhile, a new album crept up on me this week too. and it has been running through my head ever since. I ran into it quite by accident shuffling through this week's rock news: Dylan in Pocatello... Dylan in Vegas... Wilson Pickett in Japan... England's legendary hitmaker Mickie Most discovers Suzi Quatro... ho hum, let's see what RCA is doing... hm, Elvis still doing one night stands... Tulsa... Houston... and here's a new album. Unlikely cover: tacky horror-movie painting of a girl in a long white crinoline gown in front of a haunted house. Not very promising. Just put one song on the turntable... oops, what was that?... and I was caught.

Sarah Kernochan's "House of Pain" (RCA, APL 1-0343)

Sarah Kernochan

The chorus of that song suggests that the only answer is rage, but the context suggests that rage won't solve a thing. Nothing will. But Kernochan has the control and poetic authority to transform that rage into a kind of wild beauty. In "Look What the Cat Dragged In" she addresses an ex-lover fallen on hard times with the most satisfying cathartic grieving ever recorded ("If you need a friend now, you could always change your name;" "You can clean your hands with my shoes, if you need something to kick;" and when she deals with the problem of trying to make love into a rational game (in "Rules to Live By") she captures the ultimate absurdity of erotic rationality ("Kindly Kiss Me on the Dotted Line") with the precision of a surgeon.

For a male listener the experience is enlightening: she translates what the dilemma of being female, of being caught in a female body (the cracks and seams that keep showing up in the imagery of "Rules to Live By") must mean to an ambitious and intelligent person, but so subtly that you realize only much later that you have heard a polemic. When she is...