



# Garcia at the Keystone: New Woman Poet on the Horizon

By Micahel 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 act 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 unobtrusively 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 genius does not show up all at once. He has no flashy signature runs like Alvin Lee or B.B. King — though like them he plays with rare authority. His art is one of endless resources, evolving patiently out of the original musical situation. Perhaps his talent shows up best 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 explaining 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-79003*) 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 bends 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 it lives in has been torn down and reassembled with the wallpaper 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 was that in the bongo drums?). 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 sneakiness. Even if you have been missing it for hours straight the time is always at hand when you happen to tune in to a few 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? Citizens, 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 Whacks and the Glass Packs (an act which is no less visual and every bit as refined) have one more Wednesday at the Keystone.

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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

glows with wit and bitter humor which gets deeper and more intense every time you hear it. The musical format of the album is flexible; it shifts from a simple piano backing to rock and even (in "Easy Girl") what sounds very like a harpichord. Like Dylan she uses rock forms provisionally, pressing them into the service of her unique insights. And like Dylan she molds the songs of the album into a coherent single statement: *House of Pain* is a vision of society the way John Wesley Harding was a vision of society. I use the comparison not with a specific resemblance in mind, but to show the level of intelligence and emotional depth she is working at. She achieves something I never thought was possible: she writes natural flowing songs that also read as convincing poems on the page, and if the music brings out rhythmic subtleties in her poetic lines that make them deepen and grow in their musical skin, that is a gratuitous, if welcome, gift.

Sarah Kernochan's reputation as a film director (*Marjo*) is already established; when this album begins to attract attention her reputation is likely to be that of a poet, but she is a rock presence and a woman in the traditional sense too, a sexy one whose immersion in the physical is no mere mannerism. She is capable of characterizing an infatuation for a man by saying "When you take off your shirt I can smell it / a mile away on the wind," but she can distance the same kind of

passion with the briefest irony: "I love to watch men use their hands / tie a knot and wrestle and dance ...". She observes all the contradictory components of human love battling inside her, but never without an alive sense of the absurdity deep within that battle, however high the stakes become. At the depths of her vision, the relationship of bondage chronicled in the song "House of Pain" — the introduction to the dark second side of the record — she sees it all so clearly it is as if we were a hundred miles away from her own despair.

*I have been trying to leave you ever since  
You caught me spying through the crack  
in your defense*

*I saw the victims of your terrible experiments*

And because of her ability to distance that pain, the most overtly comic song on the album, "Revenge of the Fly in the Ice Cube, The Poisoned Mouse, and the Burnt Moth," is also the most terrifying. The problem of describing the sense of loss, that something in you which has died after a break-up, the pain that mundane household objects seem to express, is almost buried in the situation. The fly says:

*Jeez who turned the lights out  
How did my tiny life get drowned out  
Thought you wouldn't hurt a flea  
But you made a frozen fool outta me  
Wee-oo-wee*

*I wrote this song posthumously.*

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 gloating ever recorded ("If you need a friend now you could always change your name," "You can bet you can use my shoes if you need something to kiss"), 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 ~~sensuous her voice has something of the double register~~ soaring quality of Maria Muldaur's, when she is bitter it is with a faintly stunned clear-headedness like that of Sylvia Plath. This is a record I suspect people will remember for a long time.

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## CORRECTION

Two printing errors that occurred in my last week's article on Bob Dylan were misleading. In the center of the fifth column of the front page (across from the tip of Bob's nose in the picture) the sentence that read "Elliott Murphy's *Aquashow* ... began with an impassioned appeal ... etc." ought to have read "Elliott Murphy's *Aquashow* ... has been greeted with unanimous critical acclaim. Paul Nelson's review of it in *Rolling Stone* began with an impassioned appeal ... etc." The appeal was in the review, not the album. Hope nobody went out and bought the album just to hear it.

In the quote from Bruce Springsteen's "4th of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)" in the middle column of page 8, the lines which came out "on the South Beach/Drags I got on it ... etc." ought to have read "on the South Beach Drags, I got on it ... etc."