

Here's a funny thing. An article from the school magazine of University College School, Hampstead, London circa 1974.

Written by our friend Nicholas Graham Smith, and his friend Glen Davis. The subject of Pete Atkin came up as two old squash players were recovering in the locker room (NB. New modern term for 'the showers') - Tony Kingsbury and Nicholas. The article was found in the loft a couple of years later.

*Nicholas took up a career in diamonds rather than journalism!!*

### **A SINGER AT NIGHTFALL**

Islington sunlight fills the airy room. On the piano by the shuttered window are a few sheets of music. A Gibson is propped against a chair, a couple of guitar cases on the floor. Hanging on the far wall, an ornamental Japanese bird cage; next to it are bookshelves - Thurber Leacock, Shakespeare. Sitting across the tape recorder from us is the relaxed form of Pete Atkin. A folk singer who needs a band to recreate his recorded sound, a pop singer who tops the bill in the folk clubs, a musician better known for his collaboration with the Observer's TV reviewer as a lyricist than for himself; Pete Atkin must be one of the most underrated singers on the suburbs of the music business today.

He comes from Cambridge, went to University there, and was director of the Footlights. He met Dave Lund there: 'I don't really remember him, except that he used to know 18 different ways of saying 'Oh.. yes!' and helped with the music for the review. It was at this time that he met Clive James: 'I spent nearly every night there, playing things and chatting about lyrics with Clive..'; in fact, Pete was a very accomplished lyricist himself but felt that he was unable to produce either ideas or satisfactory constructions to write what he wanted to.

They wrote a few songs together, then managed to interest Essex Music in publishing one. After that, they decided to try to record an album - 'if you can believe it, the whole album only cost £315 to produce' - 'Beware of the Beautiful Stranger' which includes a track which deserves to be a pop classic, 'Master of the Revels'. 'Unfortunately Philips didn't think that half-a-dozen plays on Kenny Everett's peak time show warranted releasing it as a single.' Philips never did show much interest in promotion, and last year Pete moved to RCA. His first two albums have been re-released and sales are now around the 5500 mark. His third album was only leased to RCA but the latest is all theirs, and the full weight of their publicity machine has been thrown behind it. At

present, Pete is in the studios again, with an album scheduled for October release.

On that first album, the songs are mainly short, production was simple. Pete's guitar, backed with bass and drums. He learnt violin for 10 years but his guitar and piano are self taught. Lately his National Steel guitar has prompted him to experiment with blues technique, backing has become heavier and strings have filled out the overall sound. Pete played in jazz clubs for a time and is a Duke Ellington fan which has strongly influenced his music. 'I still prefer the sound of acoustic instruments'; one stylistic aspect which recurs in his songs is the use of talented soloists. Elaborate electric production reached a peak on the 'King at Nightfall' album, but the most outstanding track - 'Thirty - year Man', the story of an ageing jazz pianist - is a simple piano accompaniment. 'I think perhaps the 'King at Nightfall' album went too far; on the 'Road of Silk' and the next album, there's a return to the simpler shorter things'.

Lyricaly, the Atkin-James songs are superb. Close-knit imagery creates a strong atmosphere, and they investigate a wide range of topics - some subjects re-appearing on subsequent albums in different forms. Occasionally the lyric may be obscure - 'The Road of Silk' album, for example, has tracks mentioning Ahiru KiroSanta and Charlie Parker - 'I don't think it really matters if you don't understand all the references, just like it doesn't matter if you don't get every reference in 'American Pie'. More often, it is the sheer realism of the lyric which is off putting. In 'Senior Citizen' the lyric talks of 'ankles folding over your shoes'. But not all the songs are complex. Pete's favourite is 'Between us there is nothing' from the 'King at Nightfall' album, which is a straight love song. Perhaps the most requested song in Pete's repertoire, however, is 'Beware of the Beautiful Stranger', the compelling tale of a fortune teller and a young man. But even the most obscure lyrics are justified by Pete's self-assured ironic delivery, and there are frequent touches of cynical wit. 'Beautiful Stranger', for example, includes 'If they put up a booster not far from this pitch, I could screen you your life to the very last twitch, but I can't even get the Lone Ranger..'

Recently, Pete has been trying more to reproduce his recorded sound live, and on his college dates, he is backed by Mana Flyer - a trio of talented young musicians. In the folk clubs, he tends to feel more limited, unless he has a piano. But his appearances are witty and intimate, and he tends to bring up as-yet-unrecorded old jokey songs. Clive and he have a contriving project of definitive 'pop' songs. 'Black Funk Rex' is a definitive teeny-bop song, while 'Song for Rita' says everything Kris Kristoffersen ever did. They hope to release all these

on an album to be recorded live in a studio, with an audience for release under the title 'Live Libel' sometime next year.

'Let it Rock' recently said that the days of 'progressive rock' are numbered, and we need to coin a new term, 'progressive pop'. That is a genre at which the James-Atkin partnership excelled'