Smokin' Neal Vitale

The fact that rock and folk music are male-dominated is hardly controversial; even a mood of preoccupation whether solo or fronting a band, and the number of long-haired people about the scene is scant. But dominance has never had any connection with quality for popular music, and a few ladles with recordings of late attest to that point. One such young man had great success with her twelve solo recordings, which span an equal number of years; another, Sandy Denny, has only rather recently pursued a career of her own, with little notice in the US. Maggie Bell, vocalist of Scott The Stoney Crowns, has long sung backup for many a superstars, but she has undeservedly avoided her (again due, in part, to limited recognition in America). Ellen McIlwaine in a rare case, a female in the very early stages of what seems to be an unavoidable rise to stardom.

The most recent efforts of Ms. Collins have put grave doubts into my mind as to just how much longer she will present anything vaguely interesting, in the guise of something of the magnitude of, say, 'Both Side Now.' 'Who Knows Where the Time Goes?' 'For what it's worth.' The People, 'Living in the USA.' The Garden, 'Truwe Stories.' The later 'Lyrics May Well Be What Drag Down' are prime examples; laudable, sandpapery vocals the past couple of years. Occasionally, a complaint can be lodged against her unique touch of boredom, a lack of enthusiasm that sometimes glints in her singing. But much more often, she is Ireneaeusus; her albums are tinged with medieval influences and with rock, and they are gorgeous. Only rarely does husband Trevor Evans' production get in the way. For the moment, Sandy is enough to satisfy: Fairport Convention has apparently reformed with Ralph McTell on guitar, and Judy Collins will be coming to Boston on April 12, at Symphony Hall with Randy Newman on keyboards and bodes well for the future. Sandy Denny has come to the fore. She is a female in the very early stages of what seems to be an unavoidable rise to stardom.

True Stories and Other Dreams (Elektra) finds Judy Collins in better form, but only occasionally. Melody may well be what drag down 'True Stories,' many of the record's songs get lost in interminable and overly involved wordings and writing. Seven-and-a-half minutes of convoluted politicking and narration in "Chen" are prime examples; 'Secret Gardens,' 'Muddy Rain,' and "Song For Martin" all stumble due to lyrics. A whole verse written by Ms. Collins herself, with only one exception, the best version on 'True Stories and Other Dreams' is "Cloth With Honor," a superior-to-the-choral version of Steve Crofts' "So Begins the Task," and the one original composition, "Fisherman Song," that retains a certain liltness, smooth singing, are obvious successes. On the other hand, the words flow easily with the music, without getting dumpy and ponderous, and Judy Collins sounds like the singer of old. Perhaps the best advice to her would be to stop writing (if all she can produce are travesties like and concentrating on picking other writer's superb material (she has done in the past) to record. True Stories and Other Dreams has its enjoyable, pleasant spots; but interspersed is perhaps the greatest amount of mediocrit for too much longer.

Ellen McIlwaine was a member of a middle-late-60's band (whose name now escapes me) that eventually tangled into obscurity; she is not exactly a new-comer to music. But it is only recently that she has assumed a singular stance; her first solo disc, the beautiful 'Booka's Ten,' (Acapella) has been followed by 'We The People (both on Polydor) that is ever better.

Ellen McIlwaine is a strong singer with a very clean, smooth voice, and she mixes in some adequate-to-very-good piano and acoustic and bottleneck guitar work. Her style of dabbling in monosyllabic bits of scat singing gives a slightly South African tinge to tunes like "Ain't No Two Ways To It (It's Love)" and "Hiding," the effect is captivating. 'I Don't Want To Play' is perhaps the most catchy number off 'We The People,' with its soaring chorus and little kids-type lyrics. The Jack Bruce-Pete Brown combination "Never Tell Your Mother She's Out Of Tune" (the lead cut off the former's Songs For A Failure) receives a good handling, as does the haunting "Underground River." Only on the traditional "Farther Along (with backing choir by those a cappella, the Persuasions) does Ms. McIlwaine find herself in foreign and unsuitable material. But the rest of the record is silkily polished and honeyed. Ellen McIlwaine is greatly maltinated if she is considered at all. But it is clear that the Crows have had better. Perhaps the tragic circumstances of Harvey's death may coincidentally open up the band and Ms. Bell to the success that has eluded them. Better.