# MAKE NOISE NOT LOVE

**Philip Norman talks to folk singer Melanie, photograph by David Montgomery**

French Pop music wears long skirts and suspenders: it is touched by that country's perennial middle-age. As interpreted recently by the Paris Olympia it consisted of an interminable variety concert headed by Gilbert Bécaud who marched around the stage for an hour, singing, shooting his cuffs like a forceful curate. And a lot of tumblers shouting *Hola!* and throwing one another over a pair of disdainful dromedaries. And Melanie, the American folk singer who, when she was announced, caused a redoubled noise from the dress circle of clicking lighters, and the unwrapping of chocolates and even pies.

However, the French have an eye like no other nation for volume and passion in girls' voices. In the previous fortnight, Melanie's single *Bo Bo Party* was being puzzled over by the sages of Radio One but selling thousands in France; even though its rock/blues style was perhaps 10 years ahead of the national taste. The Olympia's respectable, dressed-up audience burst out clapping as she began *Mr Tambourine Man*. Melanie's is perhaps the definitive version, since the shifting textures of her voice absolutely dominate Bob Dylan's pretentious art-school lyrics. She sings beautifully.

Girls with guitars are a vast set of bores. As Mary Hopkin demonstrated, they have replaced Irish sopranos as sure-fire winners of amateur talent contests. Next to this girl, Hopkin sounds like a whistle; but at first sight Melanie looks no different from any of them. Alone under a spotlight, long hair falling down, mandarin trousers concealing who knows what kind of legs, guitar accompaniment mainly in the key of E and the occasional ending in tears. The difference is in power. Her voice rises like Havana smoke and batters like a cannonade and sometimes makes the heart stand still.

In real life she looks equally predictable: a 22-year-old from New York with classic high school features, a chin dimple and a tendency to call women she disapproves of 'Lesbians'. She will tell you that her biggest problem is perspiration, and giggle and choke while describing the American Customs' reaction to the bags of soil she takes home as souvenirs from France and Holland – "It's dirt! It's just dirt!" She isn't really famous: £50 will secure her to play at a university occasion. Part of the reason for this is that she has so far been hindered on record by the size and weight of her own voice. Sometimes after a recording session the engineers have had to work for eight hours to balance the tapes.

Her management is patient. She travels under the supervision of Artie Ripp, proprietor of Buddah, her recording label, and the man who discovered the most original group of all, John Sebastian and the Loving Spoonful. Ripp is something between an Apache and a New York Jew, with Medusa coils of black hair and a stetson worn almost permanently. He answered the door of his Paris hotel suite in his underpants. His mind – and considerable funds – seem totally occupied by Melanie. "Did you see her face at the end of *Momma Momma?* It was *transfigured*. When she talks it's like a mediaeval nun."

One reason for Melanie's impact is her total lack of self-consciousness – the stage innocence and downcast eyes so favoured by contemporaries. She simply lets her voice slip, a kind of poltergeist. Tape recorder needles almost jump out. She began to play *Save a Little Bit for My Father* after the Olympia concert in front of a lot of thunderstruck waiters from the backstage party; she was hot, exhausted, and had eaten nothing but a fibrous cheese sandwich presented to her by the waiters.

She likes to mess around too, and bleat like Shirley Temple. "I can remember when I was about six, being in a long yellow dress, singing 'Give me a little kiss will you – huh?' and 'Playmate come out and play with me, and bring your dollies three . . .' My mother was a jazz singer. She appeared with Sam the Man Taylor, who used to wear a big plaid hat and play the sax. But she was a very pure singer; she would hold a note and not whine off like I do. She's in all my songs.

"My father was of Ukranian descent and had a whole chain of discount stores, but not any more. They're getting a divorce. It was kind of like husband and wife were brother and sister – they like each other, they really do. And I had an uncle who was a college folk singer and looked a little like mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent from Superman."

She was in fact something of a trial and made her mother go back to smoking by running away from high school in New Jersey. "I was constantly breaking the code of dress there, just because I had Indian boots from Arizona. I had this terrible teacher who, the first day I was in school, said 'You wear your hair like a witch'; and I decided I had to get as far away as possible." She ran off to Los Angeles, was caught and held for a week in a detention centre.

"They put me by myself in a room with a toilet bowl in the middle and a glass thing in the door so that everybody could see in. For days I couldn't go. And they made me wash the make-up off my face: I got out of the shower, my eyes hurting from the acid shampoo, and the lady said 'go wash it off'. She was sick. Then I was put in a room with four girls, two were crazy and two were Lesbians. One of them who had stolen a typewriter became kind of my friend. But I couldn't write any songs there. I was like a scared rabbit. I think if you *imagine* yourself in a prison, that's the way to get really into writing something."

She wrote *Momma Momma*, a song that practically bursts with anguish, when she was 15. She did summer repertory and sang in a couple of student bars and then studied drama for two years, she believes profitably. "Everything that I do or see becomes part of a storehouse for a song. I loved *Major Barbara* but I knew I could never play that part. And Chaucer – the Wife of Bath," she gave a loud guffaw. (A folk singer with a broad laugh?) "I loved classical parts because of the way they made you walk. My natural walk is rather heavy. I loved Shakespeare too. I had a whole book of summaries."

Most of her songs, like *Save a Little Bit for my Father*, were composed after she left drama school "to keep myself up". They depict her as a cold child who, perfectly innocently, wants to be taken home by a stranger. She went to audition for the part of Barbara Allen in *Dark of the Moon* and, as her publicity expresses it, walked into the wrong room, met some record producers and they, noticing her guitar, asked her to sing. It was in this way that she met her boy friend Peter, a record-manager who seems to be kept slightly at bay by Artie Ripp's careful management, and who sometimes addresses Melanie as "my lady".

She last saw her mother on a four-hour stopover in New York, and it was a disaster. "I sat in the plane afterwards and cried and cried." Artie Ripp, in his big hat, plays her father and Peter her brother.

She plays the guitar with a good many fumbles, with a preference for the old skiffle chords of E, A and B flat. She complains that she has scarcely anything nice to wear. She confesses to acute nervousness before a live performance. "There are always people who know if you're putting it on. Someone will say 'That's the line where she's thinking about eating.' Last night I was at the Phillmore in San Francisco and it seemed the most important thing in my life. But everything gets to feel that way. I get very violently nervous. I do breathing exercises and when I take that breath from the stomach I start to heave."

"She oddly enough has no sex life," Ripp says. "This is a fact that is not generally known. All of her giving and receiving is when she sits on that stool under the light. I think that at an early age Melanie decided that she didn't want to be a part of the high school thing – 'Did you let him?' Maybe she wasn't as cute as the next chick was, maybe her legs weren't as good.

"And at some point, I believe, Melanie gave up being a woman and turned into a being" ●