

A Conversation With Judy Collins

By MARSHALL HEYMAN

cleaning up our parks are two



Taking a brief walk around Greenwich Village with the singer-songwriter

Judy Collins, one begins to realize that old cliché is, of course, true: The more things change, the more things stay the same.

Ms. Collins has been particularly introspective as of late. Her most recent album, “Bohemian,” which features four new songs as well as covers of Joni Mitchell, Woody Guthrie and “Pure Imagination,” from “Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory,” hit stores concurrently with a new memoir, “Sweet Judy Blue Eyes: My Life in Music,” in which she chronicles her bout with alcoholism and her relationship with Steven Stills, among other defining moments.

Memoirs of life in the music business have been particularly popular lately, and Ms. Collins, walking past Washington Square Park, said that she has read many of them. But only after she finished a draft of her own book did she fear the noise of their voices might get entwined with hers. “Of course I loved ‘Life’ by Keith Richards,” Ms. Collins said. “And ‘Just Kids’ by Patti Smith.”

It is easy to get Ms. Collins on a detour about how she wrote her book, finding her way in the music business, going to therapy, or one of her favorite political issues of the moment (immigration and



Singer-songwriter Judy Collins, above, on Bleecker Street. She popped in to a Barnes & Noble, right, where her book was displayed.

particularly hot buttons, easily pressed). It is harder to get her back from one—especially when it comes to the political issues. As part of the folk movement, Ms. Collins has never been afraid to speak her mind.

On this day, however, Ms. Collins wanted to take a more contemplative visit to where she got her start. She grew up as a musician in downtown New York. Now, though she doesn’t like to admit it, Ms. Collins is an uptown girl. For years she has lived uptown—at first to be near her therapist, she said—and regularly performs in residence at the Carlyle. The East 70s, she insisted, are not so far, philosophically or location wise, from the Bitter End, where she would perform sometimes three shows in

an evening, finding music to play (like “Blowing in the Wind”) at a nearby shop that no longer resides there.

After poking in the window at the Bitter End, Ms. Collins crossed Bleecker Street to check out another venue. When she played there, “it was called the Village Gate. What is it called now?” (Le) Poisson Rouge, Ms. Collins was told. As she reminisced, a gypsy cab popped its trunk in front of the lounge, and several musicians popped out, having just traipsed in from Brooklyn for a set.

“What are you called?” Ms. Collins asked as they unpacked their guitars.

“We’re Princess Chelsea,” said a young woman named Chelsea Nikkel. “We’re from Australia.”

“I used to play here years ago,” Ms. Collins responded. “In New York, this is often where it begins. Best of luck.”

Making further trails in the Village, Ms. Collins recognized some personal landmarks—where head shops, for instance, might have been replaced by macaroni and cheese stands; other bars slash venues she never performed at; the Minnetta Tavern, where she might have occasionally had a drink, but now is a hot spot serving \$26 burgers. She pointed out places where she briefly lived, and then it was back to Sixth Avenue past the commercial hot dog stand and Duane Reade.

A Barnes & Noble is now on that strip, and Ms. Collins poked in to make sure her book was on display, and to actually buy a copy to bring to a dinner party that evening. “You have to keep up sales,” she said.

And then, she hopped into a cab and started to make her way back uptown.



