

# Film: Phil Ochs, a Short Biography

By JANET MASLIN

**F**OR those with a lingering interest in the folk singers of the 1960's and the political and cultural climate in which they flourished, Michael Korolenko's "Chords of Fame" is worth recommending for some of the raw material that it contains. But Mr. Korolenko, in assembling this portrait of the late singer-songwriter Phil Ochs, has taken an exasperating approach to his subject. Reasonable as it would be to expect the music and photographs of the real Mr. Ochs to figure prominently in this documentary, Mr. Korolenko has replaced him with a double. All the other key characters in this story appear as themselves.

In "Chords of Fame," which opens today at the Film Forum, the very caustic and intense Mr. Ochs is portrayed by Bill Burnett, who is so callow and bland in the role that he captures nothing of his mercurial subject. Mr. Burnett's slight vocal resemblance to the singer is no justification for the lengthy impersonation on which the film is centered. In trying to progress from a furiously energetic, wisecracking young man to the dissipated and discouraged figure who eventually took his own life, his range is pitifully limited. To suggest Mr. Ochs in his hard-drinking later days, for instance, Mr. Burnett preserves his own clean-cut manner but staggers around in a raincoat with a large stain.

## Lots of Folk Singing

**CHORDS OF FAME**, directed by Michael Korolenko; produced by Korolenko, David Sternburg, Mady Schufzman. At the Film Forum, 57 Wafts Street. Running time: 88 minutes. This film has no rating.

**WITH:** Pete Seeger, Oscar Brand, Odetta, Peter Yarrow, Tom Paxton, Dave Van Ronk, Eric Andersen, Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman and Bill Burnett.

**IN OUR HANDS**, produced by Robert Richter and Stanley Warnow; camera and editing by 350 independent film makers; distributed by Libra Cinema 5. Running time: 89 minutes. This film has no rating.

**WITH:** James Taylor, Holly Near, Meryl Streep, Peter, Paul & Mary, Ellen Burstyn, Orson Welles, Dr. Hejen Caldicott, Dr. Benjamin Spock, the Rev. William Sloan Coffin  
uf8143.

What little information there is about Mr. Ochs to be gleaned here is contained in the comments of those who knew him. Friends like Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman and Jim Glaser speak of the contradictory charm and abrasiveness in the singer's character, and the manager Harold Leventhal mentions Mr. Ochs's fierce jealousy of his contemporary, Bob Dylan. The club owner Mike Porco tells of having to evict Mr. Ochs in his later days, and how perversely likable he was even then. The animated manner of Michael Ochs gives some sense of his late brother's character, as do the rueful reminiscences of his sister, Sonny.

As for Mr. Ochs's music, it is best represented here by the other veteran folk singers who are glimpsed here, if

only briefly. Eric Andersen sings "When I'm Gone," and calls it one of Mr. Ochs's loveliest songs; Pete Seeger and Oscar Brand convey the spirited sarcasm of "Draft Dodger Rag." Tom Paxton, Dave Van Ronk and Bob Gibson are seen performing a few seconds' worth of "That's The Way It's Gonna Be." And, most movingly, a chorus of friends sings the beginning of "Crucifixion," Mr. Ochs's most ambitious song. But the singer's own voice is almost entirely absent from this biography, and this omission makes "Chords of Fame" seem, at the very best, incomplete.

On the same bill, "In Our Hands" is an account of a peace rally in Central Park on June 12, 1982, that featured some of the same personnel that appears in "Chords of Fame," together with updated versions of some of the same attitudes as well. Camera, sound and editing here are by 350 different independent film makers, with Robert Richter and Stanley Warnow overseeing the project.

Not surprisingly for such a technically complicated film, "In Our Hands" tends toward a certain amount of repetition, particularly in scenes that show marchers boarding buses in various distant spots at dawn, and in others that convey a carnival atmosphere. The film is best when it confines itself to the speeches and music that were heard at the rally, and to the stirring spectacle of so many marchers gathered in the spirit of a single cause.