

POP: JOAN ARMATRADING AND GRAHAM NASH

By STEPHEN HOLDEN New York Times Published: July 28, 1986

JOAN ARMATRADING is one of pop music's most gifted practitioners of the dramatic monologue, a form that doesn't lend itself readily to the conventional strictures of pop songwriting. Yet in her 12-year recording career, the West Indian-born English singer, songwriter and guitarist has succeeded in writing dozens of pungent first-person lyrics that examine the terrain of romantic love from a remarkable variety of perspectives.

Listening to Miss Armatrading perform more than two dozen of her original songs Friday evening at Pier 84, one had to marvel at the ease with which she transcended the clichés that even the most skillful pop songwriters tend to fall back on. Instead of setting up characters and situations in a narrative format, Miss Armatrading's songs typically begin in the middle of a drama, with the characters unburdening themselves at a particular moment. Because her melodies follow the natural rhythms of these one-sided conversations, the complexity of their punctuation often comes close to jazz improvisation. And with an expressive range that takes in extremes of vulnerability and combativeness, Miss Armatrading's dusky folk-jazz singing is more than a match for her material. She is her own best interpreter.

At Friday's concert, Miss Armatrading sang songs from all phases of her career, but with an emphasis on midtempo rock ballads from her latest album, "Sleight of Hand." Though not as compelling as some of her older and softer ballads, the new material showcased Miss Armatrading's increasing confidence as a rock singer.

Graham Nash, who opened for Miss Armatrading, performed songs from his recent solo album, "Innocent Eyes," whose brand of sleek streamlined pop is a marked departure from the rougher-hewn folk-rock of Crosby, Stills and Nash. The new style nevertheless smoothly accommodated modernized arrangements of old favorites like "Our House" and "Teach Your Children," which Mr. Nash sang with his customary sweetness.