

Little new on Mitchell's latest

By
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The Hissing of Summer Lawns
Joni Mitchell
7E-1051
1975 Electra/Asylum/Nonesuch Records

How unclear is the border between tour de force and ego-trip — a matter of shading, perhaps, of perspective, of inferred intent. At times Joni Mitchell seems to have wrestled from her music a dual citizenship into both realms.

If one considers *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* as a passport between the sublime and the mundane, then visas both profound and pretentious have been stamped in it. The album is a gem — as most of her music seems to me — but it remains a cold stone that casts a flawed light.

As musical evolution — not necessarily progression — *Hissing of Summer Lawns* takes up where *Court and Spark*, Mitchell's last — and immensely popular — collection of original work, left off. Gone are the simple ballads and rhythms — her voice and acoustic guitar wrought into tensile har-

mony which endeared Mitchell to her early fans. The folk-music-laden structure from the days before her discovery by AM radio has been supplanted by a rigorously improvisational, but nonetheless tightly-controlled species of jazz, aided and abetted by the L.A. Express minus Tom Scott.

But where these stylistic innovations prospered in the original and organic wholeness of *Court and Spark*, they appear vestigial here, often blunting the cutting edge of her lyrics much as Muzak dulls our minds in department stores. Not that they fail always and completely, only that a distracting sameness creeps in by the fourth or fifth cut.

Although Mitchell excels with the guitar and piano, her finest instrument remains her voice: the distinctly fluid vocals manipulate lyrics with peculiar, almost alarming skill. Against that pliable, yet steely instrument, the sidemen seem to be wielding clumsy contrivances of metal and wood, which proceed best when serving as royal courtiers in a parade, weaving their subordinate melodies and clearing the metaphysical space before the procession of her

voice.

Mitchell's poetry here alternately provokes and languishes. At times the lyrics ring as pretentiously as the liner notes (which she also wrote). Occasionally they subside into triteness or jargon:

Critics of all expression/judges in black and white

*Saying it's wrong/Saying it's right
Compelled by prescribed standards/Or some ideals we fight.*

Elsewhere she touches truth with modest or compelling power as in "Don't Interrupt the Sorrow," a beautiful paean of resentful feminine martyrdom:

*Anima rising/Queen of Queens
Wash my guilt of Eden/Wash and balance me*

*Anima rising/Uprising in me tonight
She's a vengeful little goddess/With an ancient crown to fight*

The imagery of Joni Mitchell has always convinced me of her particular claim as a poet of genius. In the "Jungle Line," she drives a rich Rousseauian metaphor through a primal tableau of contemporary urban life.

"In France They Kiss on Main Street" offers us a light-hearted diversion from the almost uniformly cool, sorrowful or bitter inclinations of the Mother songs: Young love was kissing under bridges/Kissing in cars, kissing cafes/Walking down Main Street/Kisses like bright flags hung on holidays.

Even the weakest song is not devoid of a line, a stanza, a phrase or two of vivid color.

Occasionally, the lyrics and the music come together irreproachably so that when this album succeeds, it captivates; when it fails, some redeeming grace lingers to beguile us, at least until the next release.

Particularly worthy of note (in addition to those already mentioned) because of vocals, instrumentals or both are "The Boho Dance" and "Harry's House — Centerpiece," (the jazz lilt of which is somewhat diminished toward the end by a facile contrivance of dissonant over-voicing.) Also, the "warrior drums of Burundi" add a hypnotic percussion to already vivid lyrics in "The Jungle Line."

Nonetheless, the very smoothness of the package, the record as a whole, unsettles me. Perhaps in our Babylonian culture, we have become too facile in equating sophistication with commercialism, but free-floating paranoia about popular musicians and groups delivers a box-load of nostalgia for such straight-forward and self-deprecating creations as "Woodstock" and "For Free."

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Local women's group plans benefit concert

A women's concert featuring Meg Christian, a feminist singer, song-writer, guitarist and auto-harpist, is set for 8 p.m. Saturday at the WOW Hall, 291 West 8th.

Ms. Christian is a recording artist with Olivia Records and has recently released her first album, *Meg Christian: I Know You Know*.

The concert is a benefit for Gertrude's Silver Eighth Note Cafe and Olivia Records.

Gertrude's directors are still looking for a building in which to house their restaurant after recently losing an eviction struggle with their former landlords. Funds received from this concert will go for setting up the new facility.

Olivia Records is a national recording company based in Los Angeles and run by women for women through a collective process similar to that of Gertrude's. They distribute on a limited basis, so their albums won't be found in regular record stores, but in places like Mother Kali's or the Book and Tea Shop.

Tickets for the concert are on sale at Mother Kali's, Book and Tea, Mountain Mover's (in the Grower's Market building) and from Green Feather Productions members at \$2.50 in advance, \$3 at the door.

Green Feather Productions is a local women's collective formed recently to present women's music concerts.

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