

BROODY

Now 47, a mellow Joni Mitchell is as cunning and crafty a songstress as ever.

Joni Mitchell: no 12-inch baggy remixes here.



JONI MITCHELL **Night Ride Home** GEFFEN GEF 24302

That familiar slap'n'drag open-tuned guitar, that lovely languid voice — huskier and smokier as the years pass, a typically melodic easy glide of a song about riding home, the singer alert enough to notice the moon on the silver power lines, happy that the man she loves is by her side, and all this set to a soundtrack of chirruping cicadas . . . aah! Joni's back!

It's three years since the just-about-OK-but-a-bit-boring-really Chalk Mark In A Rain Storm, which came three years after the somewhat snazzier Dog Eat Dog, itself preceded three years earlier by the first of her I-Love-Larry LPs, Wild Things Run Fast. Larry Klein's still aboard, on bass, production and hand-holding, and Joni's songs are cunningly crafted, bearing witness to her abiding love for a well-contoured phrase and her fascinating facility to coax curious chord sequences into song-shape. Exciting it isn't. There's no drive, not a hint of a backbeat, to anything on Night Ride Home. It cannot be danced to. Neither is there any of that jazzy screech-wailing to which she abandoned herself in the late '70s. Instead, it's bluesy, broody and generally mellow from start to finish.

Two tracks stand out. A folkily plucked acoustic guitar introduces Slouching Towards Bethlehem, the song that ends the first side, whose lyrics immediately call attention to themselves: "Turning and turning within the widening gyre . . ." The Barry Manilows of this world don't usually write 'em like that, of course. Then again, neither do the Joni Mitchells, for Slouching Towards Bethlehem is Joni's musical adaptation of W.B. Yeats's The Second Coming. How and why is, for now, a mystery which subsequent interviews are sure to solve.

The second stand-out, and easily the LP's best song, is Come In From The Cold, the kind of looking-through-the-eyes-of-age song that Joni Mitchell's aspired towards (and occasionally succeeded in) writing down the years. If there's any compensation that comes with finding yourself in your late forties, it's being able to bring ever clearer perspectives to bear on your past. Those perspectives are explored not only in this song, but also in the four other second side songs, all of them heavy with retrospection, reminiscence, and reflection that's been polished 'til it shines. ★★ ★

John Bauldie