

The MITCHELL Mystique

Joni Mitchell currently enjoys a status within the Rock and Folk Establishment which I am certain she never expected to attain and which must be exquisitely uncomfortable; last year's pet, Joni has now apparently developed into almost a Totemic Figure. . . . in the minds of Her Set of fans; she has emerged as some sort of REPLACEMENT for Joan Baez; It's kind of like as though a Miss Folk-Rock America throne existed, from which the sweet-voiced and clean-minded, but musically tepid Miss Baez is being asked to abdicate, so that Joni Mitchell--prolific and creative poetess-singer--may succeed her as a more fitting representative of today's newly-sophisticated and demanding young music audience. . . . Evidence of this surprisingly widespread viewpoint was a story in a recent issue of *Crawdaddy* titled "In the Sweet By & Baez," by Peter Stampfel--founder of a group known as The Holy Modal Rounders and long a Greenwich Village folk-rock insider--in which Stampfel concluded that "Joan Baez is to Joni Mitchell as Minnie Mouse is to the White Goddess." Peter obviously feels he has the situation down righteous. . . . Personally, I think it was a grossly oversimplified statement of a situation that deserves deeper consideration.

And I wonder about the wisdom of musicians actively involved in the same areas making such sweeping musical judgments--either good or bad--upon one of their number--not because Stampfel and other articulate "progressive rock" music players don't have a right to express opinions: they do and should. . . . but too often these opinions sound like Pronouncements and Edicts, and some musicians are even haughtier than critics in thinking that their conclusions are above challenge; when actually, I think that a reporter or observer not personally involved in the lives of musicians is sometimes in a better situation for giving an unbiased reaction to what is going down in the music itself. Sometimes a personal disagreement--or a personal affection--for a particular performer can be a very large mote in the eye of a friend with the best intentions in the world. The most acute eye can lose focus from too close-up; the clubby atmosphere which permeates progressive pop, rock and folk music today could be its downfall; All music to the people! The Beatles have always known this axiom and always practiced it. . . . Dylan's *Nashville Skyline* is solid evidence that he, too, has caught on. . . . and we realize that what he has been searching for all these years, and now found, is 'The People, Yes!'

Joan Baez has been seeking The People in her own way; in the last few years she has become increasingly absorbed in political activism. . . . and at the same time more and more remote from the force-center and the change-center of popular music; the changes have been coming very, very fast here and the truth is that Joan just hasn't been fast enough on her feet

to keep up. I have a feeling that most true artists are basically apolitical creatures--you have to make a choice somewhere along the line between art and politics--Dylan made his, and oddly enough, in opting for music and being true to his individual art, he came closer to the soul of The People than ever before. Joan Baez made her choice too; I think, probably, for the very reasons Stampfel criticizes her, it was not such a hard choice for her to make. . . . In fact, I think the shift in priorities may have been almost a relief in getting her off the hook musically; scorning "her music" for long periods, laying it aside for the barricades, I wonder if she realized she was abdicating that invisible Miss F-RA throne, a throne to which there would be no returning. Her head may well be swimming from the shock of attacks like Stampfel's--or, what I think is more likely, she may not actually give a damn, because music never interested her as much as Social Action anyhow; two years ago when Joan gave a free concert on the Washington Monument grounds, a rebuttal to the DAR who refused to let her use their hall, an estimated crowd of 25,000 turned out for the occasion and stayed for the concert, even though most of them were backed up too far from the amplifiers to hear her. . . . as long as Joan can continue to get audiences of this size interested in her message, she will not care what the critics or the Pop Establishment think of her; she lives in a whole different world from that of the Fold-Rock Club.

All this is an attempt to explain, in part, why I think comparisons between Joan Baez and Joni Mitchell are irrelevant. Each one of them is into an entirely different thing; they have very similar vocal ranges and both play guitars. . . . and, as far as I can tell, that is just about all they have in common. . . .

Joni Mitchell is hardly a militant; there is nothing of the political radical about her. The one anti-war song in her new album *Clouds*, "The Fiddle and the Drum," beats as gently as the wings of a dove. Where Dylan & Manuel's Baez in her Dylan compendium--rants and rips, "The Fiddle and the Drum" (sung a capella by Joni) soothes and gentles. . . . Joni Mitchell's song is not only anti-war, in the sense of formalized, organized war games; but also, anti-nihilism and anti-destructivism; and, really, anti being anti.

"Can we help you find the peace and the star/ Oh my friend. . . ." Joni asks; and hearing it, you have the feeling that she has searched herself for an answer to the jams of the world and that this song is the response she has found--not a kicker by any means. Joni speaks not only for herself but for those friends, admirers and devotees who are turning to her words for their unique kind of lyrical comfort. It is ridiculous to try to "compare" Joan Baez singing "Tears of Rage" to Joni Mitchell singing "The Fiddle and the Drum" . . . sure, it's no contest. . . . Some people might say Joan doesn't interpret Dylan's words properly, when the fact is that she doesn't interpret, period;

I suspect that music is simply a means for Joan Baez of advancing non-musical causes; she sings "Tears of Rage" quite calmly, so deadpan that it is almost camp. On the other hand, Joni Mitchell also sings "The Fiddle and the Drum" calmly (through with angst; Joni is the angst-queen, anyhow--". . . what will happen if she tries. . . ?" and cats crying at the keyholes and everything. . .)--Anyway, this nervous calmness is appropriate here, because it is a quiet and tentatively affirming song. . . . so the basic question of whether the "Tears of Rage" type of protest song is more or less effective than a peace song like "The Fiddle and the Drum" becomes obscured by the personal motivations of the two performers, and further confused by the question of vocal mannerisms. . . . There is no more point in vilifying Joan Baez for being what she is and always has been, than there would be point in chastising Joni Mitchell for writing a Can-Am friendship song rather than sitting-in downtown at draft board headquarters. . . . Some protestors fired up the records, some poured bottles of their own blood over the records. . . . Instead, Joni Mitchell's song says, in effect, 'let's look at the record'--and the questions our little Canadian friend asks are not rhetoric; they are heavy questions. . . . "How did you come/to trade the fiddle for the drum. . . ." which all of us can profitably meditate. . . .

I want to get back to mannerisms, because at the time I reviewed Joni Mitchell's first album (*Pictures I Hear*, HP November 1968)--those mannerisms and what I called her 'singular style' were bothering me a lot; I find, to my relief and enjoyment in *Clouds*, that generally Joni has subdued her histrionic leaning so that a listener does not feel forced into admiration for the sheer technical prowess of her voice at the expense of the mood-building of her songs; the only slightly irritating thing I noticed about *Clouds* is that Joni--notably at ease at the bottom as well as at the top of her range--tends to sing at either the extreme bottom ("Tin Angel" and "Both Sides Now") or the extreme top ("I Don't Know Where I Stand" and the descant for "Songs to Aging Children Come")--I think her avoidance of the middle range, rather than mere show-offiness--is an attempt to ensure a variety of sound in an album depending almost wholly upon the variants of one flexible voice and one virtuoso guitar--no 'production' to speak of. . . . Also, I noted that both of the songs done in the low voice and with such dragged momentum are already famous; Tom Rush recorded "Tin Angel," and, of course, Judy Collins and God knows who all (Dave Van Ronk and Frank Sinatra and people like that) have sung "Both Sides Now." Apparently Joni was worried in these two cases about how to avoid associations with well-known versions of her songs; there is a sense of strain and self-consciousness in her phrasings of the two songs, almost a feeling of embarrassment. The inclusion of two songs

written so long ago may possibly have been in response to the urgings of admirers and friends, the kind of people who are sure that a songwriter's personal rendition must be the only correct and definitive one. It is not necessarily so; the urgers were ill-advised in this case - Judy Collins' "Both Sides Now," with its swooping swagger, is still happiest listening; and Tom Rush's ripe, fully-orchestrated and comparatively up-tempo treatment of "Tin Angel" is exactly right. . . .

Still, the inclusion of these older songs makes for useful comparison in the only area of competition I can consider really valid; the creator's own past performance. "Roses Blue," "That Song About the Midway," "I Think I Understand," and especially, "The Gallery," show Joni Mitchell achieving new heights of subtlety and complexity as a poet and composer. . . . The other thing that mainly bothered me about *Song to a Seagull*, a kind of adolescent sentimentality and slick-magazine banality in some of the ideas - is almost indiscernible now - In fact, I am amazed at the amount of emotional growth evidenced by Joni Mitchell's songs in the relatively short period of one year. Joni still isn't exactly the meat and potatoes of pop, but a surprising amount of the content of *Clouds* stick to your ribs. "Roses Blue" is a disturbingly acute psychological study of an unpleasant type of little lady you can meet in hip circles everywhere - (Joe McDonald's "Not So Sweet Martha Lorraine" was probably her big sister). The conception of this song as a warning and a cautionary is proof of just how well Joni is beginning to know her audience and to know some of the kinds of things she can say that will be of help to the particular kinds of young people who will listen to her and not to somebody like, say, Joan Baez. . . .

The Roses of this world are too far gone to be reached by the simple old-fashioned humanism and brotherhood pleas of a Joan Baez . . . the creative person in today's young and

It is interesting that "Roses Blue" is constructed similarly to the dramatic mode that misfired so badly in "The Pirate of Penance;" Joni now has something relevant to put inside a dramatic structure. Many of her earlier songs were "prettier" in a conventional sense, more melodic and luscious than the newer work, which is more sinewy and thematically heavier; she has just about quit herself of the cardboard dramatics, the easy cliches, and the mild but insistent self-pity of songs like "Penance," "Marcie," "Nathan LaFraneer," and "I Had A King." The 'saint' of "The Gallery" is a far more vivid and touching character than the 'king' of "I Had A King." Joni's wonderfully subtle irony in "The Gallery" fulfills the sly promise of last year's "Sisotowbell Lane;" "The Gallery" could almost be called a feminist song, feminist in the best sense of the word - Joni is a far cry from Emmeline Pankhurst, but this song opens the door for a whole new genre; a lady songwriter is daring to expose the chicanery, fraud and general caddishness of a species of egomaniacal male artist (or pseudo-artist), with whom some of us are all too hurtfully familiar. . . . any girl who hangs about the fringes of the pop

world is likely to have, at one time or another, encountered the dastardly "artistic" male. . . . "I am a saint/Turn down your bed. . . ." ah, yes. Some of us girls are getting pretty sick of hearing that "Women Is Losers" and that ". . . you'll have bad times, and he'll have good times/doing things that you won't understand. . . ." Tammy Wynette, Janis Joplin and too many other intelligent but male-browbeaten singer-songwriters are saying we have to grind our teeth and bear it, because that's the woman's lot, that's the way it always has been. Now Joni Mitchell is here with her delicate surgical instruments, and at last the world's longest and most maltreated minority group has a worthy musical champion, one of our own sex, one who knows the ilk of her audience; instead of forgiving her artistic cad, Joni lets him hang by his own words.

"Chelsea Morning," possibly one of those leftovers from an earlier period, is, nevertheless, a delicious and satisfying imagist-poet tidbit - it got me wishing my windows faced toward the sunrise; ". . . and the sun poured in like butterscotch and stuck to all my senses. . . ."

It would be that "Song About The Midway" is a variation or outgrowth of the old blues "Crossroads," which the Cream and other groups have done to death.

Besides the title similarity, there is the repeated phrase "Slowin' down/I'm gettin' tired!" like the last line in "Crossroads;" "I believe I'm sinkin' down. . . ." While "That Song About the Midway" is more ballad than blues, it gives you a sense of how an imagination like Joni's can take folk-contexts and traditional influences and turn them into fresh personal com-

munications; the Beatles do this as naturally as breathing, but very few others even attempt it.

"Songs to Aging Children Come. . ." The songs on this album are not happy songs, altogether; every one of them reflects that Mitchell angst, a sort of fine-veined emotional conflict, and they are shot through with half-hopeful unanswered questions. Even in "Chelsea Morning," the sunniest is shadowed somewhat by the line ". . . and we'll talk in present tense. . . ." a kind of moratorium line which hints of other, tenser times and tenses.

I trust Joni Mitchell when she says; "Fear is like a wilderland/stepping stones on sinking sand. . ." I believe she knows all about those awful dreams that come to aging children sometimes; about that half-world where everything is almost, but horribly not quite, the same - subtly disfigured dreams where you think at first you are awake, then realize you are still asleep and have to try once again to wake up. Joni says: "Sometimes voices in the night will call me back again. . . ." and whatever it is drags you back again, and you HAVE to try to wake up. . . . Dreaming like that is not at all uncommon in places where the fiddle has been traded for the drum. *Clouds* is a perfect title for a song collection in which Joni Mitchell performs the beautiful and humane service of lancing open some of our vaguely threatening dreamcloud-boils, and she washes them, with her healing rain. . . . Joni, you look sort of like a cute Minnie Mouse, but maybe there is something of the priestess, if not the goddess, in you. . . . Merciful Minerva! as Wonder Woman used to say when she wanted to get going with some dea-ex-machina. □brigitta

and Minnie Mouse

