

overview

Record review

Joni Mitchell's 'Hejira'

a review by Garth Cramer

Like Neil Young's *Tonight's the Night*, or her own *Blue*, the album cover of Joni Mitchell's *Hejira* offers a revealing clue as to the nature of what's inside.

Cloaked in dull browns and blacks, with a vision of a desert highway penetrating the soul of the artist, *Hejira*'s package serves as a visual metaphor for the music within, the "prisoner of the white lines of the freeway", as she terms it in the album's opening song. And although the concept is new to her music, the songs' stories and emotions are familiar Joni Mitchell.

In *Hejira*, we have Joni Mitchell the artist frustrated by Joni Mitchell the person who is plagued by romantic disillusion and an inability to escape the sterility of her artistic milieu. And although her themes remain familiar there are no songs as memorable or musically accessible as a "Help Me", "Carrie" or "A Case of You". *Hejira* however does come part way in overcoming last year's problematic *Hissing of Summer Lawns*.

In a wise move, Joni has abandoned the ersatz jazz sound that had cluttered up her last album. *Hejira* instead witnesses a return to a more sparse sound. The music is predominately guitar and percussion oriented and the type of rhythm provided by such an arrangement best frames her poetic-sung style.

But as in the case of *Summer Lawns*, *Hejira* is difficult to listen to. Musically Joni's work has always been a bit eccentric and it is only coincidental that her music often becomes commercially attractive, for by and large she is after bigger game. But in her last two albums a pre-occupation with lyrical conceptualizing has developed to a point where her music has suffered in the process. Although stimulating and masterful lyrically, her songs have a musical foundation that is tedious. For the most part the emotional impact of *Hejira* is

delivered by her lyrics and not the music. There is a haunting, gloomy feel that is emitted by her music although it is strangely beautiful, over a period of cuts it becomes somewhat overbearing.

However, because we are dealing with one of the most talented members of the pop music world's aristocracy such a normally destructive flaw does not hide the album's merit on other levels.

To begin with, one has to have a great deal of respect for the integrity of Joni Mitchell as an artist. Forever the dutiful clinician, Joni unflinchingly performs self-surgery in exhibiting all her scars and wounds to her public. No other artist in contemporary music dares to be as revealing.

And although it is easy to be cynical and denounce such indiscretions as self-indulgent posturing it is actually more accurate to say that Joni possesses a rare degree of honest sensitivity. Perhaps a more valid criticism of such emotional prostitution is the question do we really care to continue to partake in albums that may be construed as mere medical updates on her particular problems?

However, what differentiates Joni Mitchell from the melo-dramatic, self-pitying dirges from the likes of a Janis Ian, is the sheer capability of Joni Mitchell as a song writer. Even at her most personal moments she is forever honest and self-critical. Consequently no matter how personal she may become, she is never pathetic.

In "Song For Sharon" she admits to one of her shortcomings at the risk of sounding self-centred or even promiscuous: "Well there is a whole world of noble cases/ And lovely landscapes to discover/ But all I really want to do right now/ Is... find another lover." Such personal candor makes it rather hard to feel either sorry or sentimental about her or her music.

Probing deeper than at any time since *Blue*, Joni comes as close as she ever as to pinpointing the hubris which is responsible for her unhappiness. The album's title song and "Amelia", a song spoken to a female confidante, best reveal such moments. In the latter she says, "Maybe I've never really loved/ I guess that is the truth/ I've spent my whole life in clouds at icy altitudes."

Personally, I feel that the times when Joni Mitchell best reveals her song-writing talents are in those instances when she can extricate herself from a situation and play the role of observer rather than participant. Such a time exists on the album in the tragic ballad "Furry Sings The Blues", a song for and about the legendary blues man Furry Lewis.

However, it is love which stimulate her illusions and the bulk of her songs, and attempts on her part to take refuge in the roads does not help her escape the pain that such illusions create. Despite all her self-analysis she can at best remain only a temporary deflector from the petty wars "only until love sucks her back



that way."

And despite the degree of intensity and honesty that Joni Mitchell's lyrics bring to her songs, her musical highway journey in *Hejira* proves only as

bearable as any prolonged trip. They're interesting to listen to once in a while but not as a steady diet. Such is the strange appeal of this particular album.

Book Review

New novel a departure for Wright

Farthing's *Fortunes*

a novel by
Richard B. Wright
review by Morley Walker

Richard B. Wright's first novel, *The Weekend Man*, published in 1971, immediately established him as a writer of acutely accurate perceptiveness. His portrait of the classic underachiever, Wes Wakeham, a man overcome by the "baffling ordinary sadness of his own existence" struck an honest chord in each of us who at any time has doubted the wisdom of the contemporary success ethic. Wright's wit and gentle prose graced a character whose everyday life might have been grey and uneventful with an inner life bordering on visionary.

His second novel, *In The Middle of a Life* (1973) gave us Freddy Landon, the middle-aged unemployed greeting card salesman who, in many ways, was simply Wes Wakeham fifteen years on. Like Wakeham, Landon seemed crushed by the weight of contemporary existence, yet with the same note of comic despair managed to grit his teeth and quietly hold on. Although *In The Middle of a Life* received generally favourable reviews, critics were quick to point out the similarities in tone and theme to Wright's earlier work. Had a promising novelist, they fearfully suggested, blown his bundle in his first two hundred pages?

Wright, though probably his own harshest critic, must have taken these comments into consideration, as his newest book, *Farthing's Fortunes*, is a radical departure from the first two novels. Gone is the meticulously controlled sense of time and place, the rich concentration of inner life, and the wryly critical view of

middle-class life. Instead, Wright presents us with a canvas as broad as the last hundred years of this continent, and a hero whose adventures take him from the small Ontario farming community of Craven Falls through ninety five years of gold rushes, wars and depressions. Will Farthing, fathered by a drunken poet and mothered by a frail woman who managed to survive a meagre two days into her son's life, tells his rollocking story from the comfortable seat of a

wicker chair in the Craven Falls Old Folks Home. Not one to have been content spending his life muddling over the vagueries of cosmic injustice, Will relates that he was more a man of action than thought. He lived the life of a dandy in bustling, turn-of-the-century New York, the life of a staid, paint salesman in Elmshurst, Ontario, a bum in the depression, and a failed assassin in the First World War. He counts among his best friends everyone from

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UMTG performs Pinter

Five Pinter Sketches
by Harold Pinter
A SEED production
sponsored by the U of M
Theatre Group

review by Alayne McGregor

Like Edward Albee, Harold Pinter is known for his acerbic portraits of the hollowness of modern life. His plays are bitter, sharp, witty and usually relentlessly middle to upper-class.

Which is why *Five Sketches* presented last week at Festival was such a shock.

It's not merely the form that's been changed, from full-length play to five-to-six minute sketches; it's the entire atmosphere. The sketches aren't bitter, they're funny, and almost invariably about the working class.

The sketches are based on quite simple gags - from the fallacies of psychological testing to labour-management problems, but, in all but one case, they come off beautifully and leave you laughing ruefully at the absurdity of it all.

The best were probably the first sketch, about a woman's overreaction to what she

thought was a man accosting her on a bus, and the last, about a restaurateur's vain attempts to lure his last customer out of his shop before closing time.

However, I'm not sure why the fourth sketch, *Black and White* didn't come off. It concerned two old women, eating bread and soup in a restaurant, who talked about food, and all-night buses, and food, and all-night buses, and... and none of it made sense. This, though, was probably not the fault of the actors; more likely, it was caused by a culture gap between Britain and Canada.

The acting was uniformly good. I particularly choked up over Gerrie Prymak as the woman being accosted in the first sketch, John Currie as the beleaguered restaurateur and Rod Walker as the lingering customer in the last sketch, and Leslie Cook as the foreman trying to explain discontent in a factory in the third sketch.

Five Sketches is not Pinter's best. But with the fine production it was given last week, it certainly ranks as extremely good.

SELECTION COMMITTEE FOR

DEAN

OF HOME ECONOMICS

The Selection Committee invites nominations, applications and/or written submissions from interested individuals and groups relating to the position of Dean of Home Economics of The University of Manitoba, the appointment to commence July 1, 1977.

Submissions, applications and/or nominations should be forwarded as soon as possible to Professor R. A. Johnson, Provost, Chairman of the Dean of Home Economics Selection Committee, Room 202, Administration Building, University of Manitoba

